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Nevaeh

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Overshadows of Grayson

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I roll my eyes in despair and see the pale girl with brown hair with exceptionally large blue eyes on her face staring at me and giving up. My only option is to keep my lost hair in 2 tails of braids, and I hope to look semi-modern and older than I am.

I shudder at the frustration in the mirror. My hair - she just will not act, damn Mary Smith for being sick and subjecting me to this ordeal. I must study for my final exams, which are next week, but here I try to brush my hair into submission. I should not sleep with her down and wet. I should not sleep with her wet. Reciting this slogan several times, I try, again, to bring it under control with the brush.

Maury is my roommate, and today of all days she has chosen to surrender to the Covid-19.

Therefore, she could not participate in the interview she had organized to do, with a mega-industry-alist tycoon that I never heard of, for the high school student magazine.

So, I volunteered. I have the last exams for an essay to complete, and I must

work this afternoon, but no - today I must drive a hundred and sixty-five miles to downtown New York to meet the enigmatic CEO of Maury Novel Enterprises Inc.

As an exceptional entrepreneur and major donor at our high school, his time is extremely valuable - much more expensive than my time - but he gave Maury an interview. A real coup, you tell me. her extracurricular activities.

Maury is stationed on the couch in the living room.

'Naddalin, I'm sorry. It took me nine months to get this interview. It will take another six to reschedule, and both of us will be out by then. As an editor, I cannot blow this up. Please, Maury begs me in her racing voice, sore throat. How do you do it even though it looks gamine and gorgeous, strawberry blonde hair in place and bright green eyes, though now red-rimmed and runny? I ignore my unwelcome sympathy.

'Of course, I'll go Maury. Do you want some Nightie, Aspen or Tylenol?'

'Aspen, please. Here are the questions and my mini-disc recorder. Just click on the record here. Without notes, I'll write everything down.'

'I know nothing about him, ' I murmured, trying, and failing to suppress my growing panic.

'The questions will see you through, go. It is a long journey. 'Okay, I'm going. Get back to bed. I made some soup for you to heat up later.' I stared at her fondly. Just for you Maury, am I going to do this? 'I will. Good luck. Thank you, Naddalin - as always, you are my savior.' I collected my bag, smiled at it sarcastically, and then exited the door into the car. I cannot believe I let Maury talk to me about this. But then Maury can talk to anyone about anything. You will be an exceptional journalist. She is understandable, powerful, persuasive, argumentative, beautiful - and she is my best friend and best friend.

The roads were empty and odd, it is early, and I do not have to be in New York until 2 in the afternoon. Luckily, Maury loaned me her Mercedes CLK sports car. I am not sure Wanda, my old Volkswagen Beetle, will start the journey in time. Oh, Merc is a fun ride, and miles drift away as I pedal to the metal. My destination is the headquarters of Mr. Mori International Corporation. It is a colossal twenty-story office building, all curved glass, and steel, a utilitarian fiction of an

architect, with the Murray House writing discreetly in steel on the glass front doors. As I hit a quarter to a second, I was so relieved not to be late entering the huge - and frankly frightening - hallway of glass, steel, and white sandstone. Behind the silent sandstone desk, a young blond woman, incredibly attractive and caring, smiles at me with pleasure. She is wearing a blazer, a sharp charcoal suit jacket, and a white shirt that I have ever seen. Looks clean.

'I'm here to see Mr. Morey snarling Black by Mary Smith.' Excuse me one moment, Miss Black. Her eyebrow arched slightly while I was shyly standing in front of her. I began to wish I had borrowed one of Maury's formal jackets instead of wearing my navy-blue jacket. I put in the effort and wore my only skirt, my sensible knee-length brown shoes, and a blue jacket. For me, that is smart. I put one of my runaway locks behind my ear where I pretend it does not scare me. 'Miss Smith is expected. Please log in here, Miss Black. You'll want the last elevator on the right, press to get to the 20th floor.' She smiles sweetly at me, undoubtedly enjoying when I check-in. She gave me a security clearance

stamped visitor very firmly on the front. I cannot help my smile.

Certainly, I just visit. I do not fit in here at all. Nothing changes, I sigh from the inside. To thank her, I walked to the bank of the elevators, past my two security men, who are much more elegant than I am in their elegant black suits. The elevator leads me at final speed to the 20th floor. The doors open, and I am in another big hallway - again all the glass, steel, and white sandstone. I face another sandstone desk and another young blond-haired person in elegant black and white clothes rises to greet me. 'Miss Black, can you wait here, please?'

She points to a seating area with white leather chairs. Behind the leather chairs is a spacious, glass-walled conference room with an equally spacious dark wood table and no less than twenty matching chairs around. Moreover, there is a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooks the New York skyline looking out onto the city sounding. It is an amazing sight, and I was temporarily paralyzed by the view. Fabulous. I sit, fish questions out of my bag, go through it and internally curse Maury for not providing him with a brief résumé. I

do not know a thing about this guy that I am about to meet.

He could be in his ninety or thirty. Uncertainty is annoying, and my nerves are resurfacing, making me tired. I never felt comfortable with one-on-one interviews, preferring to remain anonymous in a group discussion where I can sit inconspicuously in the back of the room. To be honest, I prefer my own company, reading a classic British novel, wrapped in a chair in a campus library. Do not sit tight in a huge edifice of glass and stone.

I turn my eyes on myself. Get a grip, Black. Judging from the building, which is both clinical and ultra-modern, I think is in his 40s: fit, tanned, and blonde hair to suit the rest of the staff. Another flawless chic blond-haired person appears from the big door on the right. What is with all the immaculate blond-haired people like Stepford here? Taking a deep breath, she stood up. 'Miss Black?' Another blond-haired person asks. Yes, I track and clear my throat. 'Yes.' There, he seemed more confident. 'Mister Murray will see you in a moment. May I take your jacket?' 'I beg you.' I struggle to wear the jacket. 'Have you been offered any refreshments?' 'Or not.'

Oh Dear, is the number one blond-haired person in trouble? The blonde number two frowned and looked at the young lady on the desk. 'Do you like tea, coffee, water?' She asks, and she turns her attention to me. 'A glass of water. Thank you,' I mumbled. 'Olivia, please bring a glass of water, Miss Black.' Her voice is stern. Olivia at once takes off and rushes toward a door on the other side of the hallway. 'My apologies, Miss Black, Olivia is our new intern.

Please sit down. Mister Morey will be another five minutes.' Olivia returns with a glass of ice water. 'Here you go, Miss Black.' 'Thank you.' Blonde No. 2 walks towards the big desk, her heels clicking and echoing on the sandstone floor. She sits, and they both carry on. Mister Morey might insist that all his employees be blond. I wonder carelessly if this is legal when opening the office door and a tall, tall African American man dressed in classy and attractive clothes with short dreads exits.

You have worn the wrong clothes. He turns around and says through the door. 'Golf, this week, Morrie.' I cannot hear the response. He turns, sees me, and smiles, his dark eyes curl at the corners. Olivia jumped and called the elevator. It looks like she

excels at jumping out of her seat. She is more nervous than me! 'Good evening ladies,' he said as he left through the sliding door.

'Mister Murray will see you now, Miss Black. Don't do it,' says girl 2. I stand shaking trying to suppress my nerves. Collecting my bag, I left the glass of water and went to the partially open door. 'You don't have to be knocked - just get in.' She smiles sweetly. I pushed the door open and stumbled, slumped on my feet, and fell vertically into the office. Double crap - me and my left foot! I am on my hands and knees at the entrance to Mr. Murray's office, and the gentle hands around me help me stand up. I am so embarrassed, damn my crap.

I must harden myself to peek. Holy cow - it is exceedingly small. 'Miss Smith.' A long hand reaches out to me with his fingers when I am straight. 'I'm Grayson. Are you okay, would you like to sit down?' So small - and cute, so cute. He is tall, wearing a gorgeous gray suit, white shirt, black tie with unruly dark copper hair, and thick, bright gray eyes looking at me subtly. It takes a moment to find my voice. 'Um. Actually -' he muttered. If this man is over

thirty then I am a monkey's uncle. Dazed, I put my hand in his hand and shake hands.

When our fingers touch, I feel a strange shudder running through me. I pull my hand in a hurry, embarrassed. It must be fixed. I blinked quickly, and my eyelids matched my heart rate. 'Miss Smith is nervous, so she sent me. I hope you don't mind, mister-um-sir.' 'And you?' His voice is warm, and he may be amusing, but this can be hard to tell from his unemotional expression. He appears mildly caring but is polite.

'Snarling Black. I'm studying English literature with Maury, Umm... Maury... Um... Miss Smith in Washington State.' He simply says, 'I see.' I think I can see the ghost of a smile in his expression, but I am not sure. 'Would you like to sit down?' He waves me towards a white leather L-shaped sofa. His office is just too big for one man. In front of the floor-to-ceiling windows is a huge modern dark wood desk that six people can comfortably dine around. Matches with the sofa side coffee table. Everything else is white - the ceiling, floors, and walls except on the wall by the door, where a mosaic of small panels hangs, thirty-six of them arranged in a square. It is gorgeous - a series of forgotten

mundane objects drawn with such fine, photographic detail. Displayed together, they are breathtaking.

'Local artist. Toron,' Morrie said when he caught my eye. Raise the ordinary to the extraordinary, 'she murmured, distracted from him and the paintings. He shakes his head aside and looks at me intently. He replied, 'I couldn't agree more, Miss Black,' in a soft voice and for some inexplicable reason I find myself blushing.

Aside from the panels, the rest of the office is cool, clean, and my bed. I wonder if it reflects the personality of Adonis who Billie fully plunges into one of the white leather chairs opposite me. I shook my head, disturbed by the direction of my thoughts, and took Maury's questions back from my bag. Next, I set up the little disc recorder and myself all my fingers and thumbs and dropped it twice on the coffee table in front of me. Mister Morey says nothing, waits patiently - I hope - because I am increasingly embarrassed and confused. When I gathered the courage to look at him, he was watching me, one hand resting in his lap and the other scaling his chin and trailing a long index finger across his lips. He is trying to suppress a smile. 'Sorry' I stuttered. 'I am not used to this.'

'Take all the time you need, Miss Black,' he says. 'Do you mind if I record your answers?' 'After I had a lot of trouble setting up the recorder - would you ask me now?' I flush. It is bothering me, I hope. Blink of an eye in the face, not sure what to say, and he pities me as he softens. 'No, I don't mind.' 'Did Maury, I mean Miss Smith, explain the reason for the interview?' 'Yes. To appear in the graduation issue of the student newspaper, where I will award degrees at this year's graduation ceremony.' Oh! That is news for me, and I am temporarily busy with the idea that someone who is not much older than me - well, six years or so, well, hugely successful, but still - he is going to give me my testimonial. He frowned, drawing my lost attention to the task at hand.

'Good,' I swallowed her nervously. 'I have some questions, Mr. Maury.' I soften a stray strand of hair behind my ear. 'I thought you might do that,' he says. He is laughing at me. My cheek warms up upon awareness, and I sit down and cross my shoulders trying to look taller and scarier. By pressing the start button on the recorder, I try to look professional. 'You are so young that you amassed such an empire. How much do you owe your success?'

I glance at it. His smile is sad, but he appears mysteriously frustrated. 'Business is all about people, Miss Black, and I'm incredibly good at judging people. I know how they work, what makes them thrive, what does not distinguish them, what inspires them, how to motivate them. A team, and I reward them well.' Pause and fix me with his gray look. 'My belief is to achieve success in any scheme. One must master this scheme, know it inside and out, and know every detail. I work hard, hard to do so. I make decisions based on logic and facts. I have an instinct that can discover and nurture an innovative idea. And good people. In sum, it is always up to the good people. '

'Maybe you're just lucky.' This is not on Maury's list - but he is overly arrogant. His eyes glow in surprise. 'I don't share luck or serendipity, Miss Black. The harder you work; the more luck seems to be. It is about having the right people on your team and directing their energies accordingly. It was Harvey Firestone who said, 'The growth and development of people are the highest calling for leadership.'

'You are a control freak.' Words came out of my mouth before I could stop

them. 'Oh, I am in control of everything, Miss Black,' he said without leaving a trace of humor in his smile. I looked at him, and he was holding my gaze steady, unemotional.

My heartbeat accelerated, and the face flushed again. Why does he have such a nerve-wracking effect on me His overwhelmingly beautiful appearance The way his eyes caught my face The way he hits his index finger on his lower lip, I hope he stops doing that 'Moreover, tremendous power is obtained by reassuring yourself in your secret dreams that you were born to control things,' he continues in a tender voice. 'Do you feel you have tremendous power?' Megalomaniac. 'I employ more than forty thousand people, Miss Black.

It gives me a certain sense of responsibility - strength if you like. If I decide that I am no longer interested in the telecom business and sell it, 30,000 people will still have a challenging time making their mortgage payments. About a month.

'My mouth opens. I am amazed at his lack of humility.' 'Don't you have an answer table? I ask, villain. 'I own my company. I do not have to answer the board. He raises his eyebrows at me. I rinse. Of course, I would have known this if

I had done the research. But damn, he is too overconfident. You have changed sides. 'Do you have interests outside of your business?

I know how tenacious Maury can be. That is why I am sitting here squirming uncomfortably under his penetrating gaze when I should be studying for my exams.

'We cannot eat money, Miss Black, and there are too many people on this planet who do not have enough to eat.'

'It sounds very philanthropic. Is it something that you are passionate about feeding the poor of the world?'

He shrugs, very uninviting.

'This is smart business,' he whispers, even though he is dishonest. It does not make sense - feeding the world's poor I cannot see the financial benefits of this, only the virtue of the ideal. I glance at the next question, confused by his attitude.

'Do you have a philosophy? If so, what is it?'

"I don't have a philosophy as such. Perhaps a guiding principle - Carnegie's: 'A man who acquires the ability to take full possession of his mind can take possession of whatever he is entitled to. 'I am very singular, motivated. I like being in control - of myself and those around me.'

'So, you want to own things?' You are a control freak.

'I want to deserve to own them, but yes, in the end, I do.'

'You are the ultimate consumer.'

'I am.' He smiles, but the smile does not touch his eyes. Again, this is at odds with someone who wants to feed the world, so I cannot help but think we are talking about something else, but I am, stumped as to what it is. I swallow hard. The temperature in the room is rising or it is just me. I just want this interview to be over. Surely Maury has enough material now. I look at the next question.

'You've been adopted. How much do you think that shaped the way you are?' Oh, it is personal. I look at him, hoping he is not offended. His brow furrows.

'I have no way of knowing.'

My interest is piqued.

'How old were you when you were adopted?

'It's a matter of common knowledge, Miss Black.' His tone is severe. I blush again. Shit.

Yes of course - if I had known I was doing this interview, I would have done some research.

I pass quickly.

'You had to sacrifice family life for your job.'

'It is not a question.' He is laconic.

'Sorry.' I squirm and he made me feel like a stray child. I will try again. 'Did you have to sacrifice family life for your job?'

'I have a family. I have siblings and two loving parents. I'm not interested in extending my family beyond that.'

'Are you gay, Mr. Maury?'

He inhales sharply and I cringe, mortified. Shit. Why didn't I use some sort of filter before reading this directly? How do I tell him I am just reading the questions?

Damn Maury and his curiosity!

'No Naddalin, I am not.' He raises his eyebrows, a cold glint in his eyes. He does not seem happy.

'I apologize. It is uh… written here. It is the first time he is pronounced my name. My heart rate has picked up and my cheeks are warming up again. Nervously, I tuck my loose hair behind my ear.

He tilts his head to one side.

'Aren't those your own questions?'

Blood is flowing from my head. Oh no.

'Uh... no. Maury - Miss Smith - she compiled the questions.'

'Are you colleagues in the student newspaper?' Oh shit. I have nothing to do with the student newspaper. It is his extracurricular activity, not mine. My face is inflamed.

'No. She's my roommate with me after- I dropped out of high school and need a haven yet was made to go back a year or more behind my class.'

He rubs his chin in silent deliberation, his gray eyes appreciating me.

'Did you volunteer to do this interview?' he asks, his voice deadly calm.

Wait, who is supposed to interview who His eyes burn my eyes, and I am compelled to answer with the truth.

'I was drafted. She's not doing well.' My voice is weak and sorry.

'It explains a lot of things.'

There is a knock on the door and blonde number two enters.

'Mr. Maury, forgive me for interrupting you, but your next meeting is in two minutes.'

'We're not done here, Andrea. Please cancel my next meeting.'

Andrea hesitates, looking at him gaping. She seems lost. He slowly turns his

head to face her and raises his eyebrows. She blushed a bright pink. Oh good. It is not just me.

'Alright, Mr. Maury,' she mumbles, then leaves. He frowns and turns his attention back to me.

'Where were we, Miss Black?'

Oh, we are back to 'Miss Black' now.

'Please don't let me stop you from anything.'

'I want to know about you. I think it's fair.' His gray eyes shine with curiosity. Double shit. Where is he going with that? He places his elbows on the arms of the chair and closes his fingers in front of his mouth. His mouth is very... distracting. I swallow.

'There's not much to know,' I said, blushing again.

'What are your plans after you graduate?'

I shrug my shoulders, dazzled by his interest. Come to New York with Maury, find accommodation, find a job. I did not think beyond my finals,

'I didn't make any plans, Mr. Maury. I just need to take my final exams.'

What I should be studying for now rather than sitting in your lavish, chic, and

sterile office, feeling uncomfortable under your penetrating gaze.

'We have a great internship program here,' he said calmly. I raise my eyebrows in surprise. Does he offer me a job?

'Oh. I'll keep that in mind,' I whisper, completely confused. 'Although I'm not sure where I belong here. Oh no. I think aloud again.

'Why do you say that?' He tilts his head to one side, intrigued, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

'It's obvious, isn't it?' I am uncoordinated, scruffy, and I am not blonde.

'Not mine,' he whispers. His gaze is intense, all humor is gone, and strange muscles deep in my stomach suddenly contract. I take my eyes off her scrutiny and blindly stare at my knotted fingers. What is going on, I must go - now. I lean forward to retrieve the recorder.

'Would you like me to show you around?' he asks.

'I'm sure you're way too busy, Mr. Maury, and I've got a long drive.'

'Are you coming back to OVHS in York?' He looks surprised, even anxious. He looks out the window. It started raining.

'Well, you better drive safe.' His tone is severe, authoritarian. Why should he care 'Do you have everything you need?' he adds.

'Yes sir,' I replied as I put the recorder back in my satchel. His eyes narrow, speculatively.

'Thanks for the interview, Mr. Maury.'

'The pleasure is mine,' he said, more polite than ever.

As I get up, he gets up and holds out his hand to me.

'Until we meet again, Miss Black.' And that sounds like a challenge, or a threat, I do not know what. I frown. When will we ever see each other again? I shake his hand once more, amazed that this strange current between us is still there. It must be my nerves.

'Mr. Maury. I nod at her. Moving with agile athletic Billie towards the door, he opens it wide.

'I just assure you to walk out the door, Miss Black.' He gives me a small smile.

He is referring to my earlier less than elegant entry into his office. I rinse.

'This is very considerate, Mr. Maury,' I crack, and his smile widens. I am

glad you find me entertaining, I look inwardly, entering the lobby. I am surprised when he follows me. Andrea and Olivia both look up, equally surprised.

'Did you have a coat? Maury asks.

'Yes.' Olivia jumps up and retrieves my jacket, which Maury takes from her before she can hand it back to me. He holds it and, feeling ridiculously embarrassed, I shrug my shoulders.

Maury puts his hands on my shoulders for a moment. I gasp at the contact. If he notices my reaction, he does not reveal anything. His long index finger presses the elevator button, and we wait - awkwardly on my part, coldly overpowered by his.

The doors open and I desperately hurry to escape. I need to get out of here. When I turn to look at him, he is leaning against the door next to the elevator with one hand on the wall. He is exceptionally beautiful. It is entertaining. His burning gray eyes stare at me.

'Naddalin,' he said in farewell.

'Grayson,' I answer. And luckily, the doors close.

My heart beats wildly. The elevator arrives on the first floor, and I rush as soon as the doors open, tripping once, but luckily

not sprawling across the immaculate sandstone floor. I run for the large glass doors and am free in the bracing, cleansing, and humid New York air. As I lift my face, I welcome the cool, refreshing rain. I close my eyes and take a deep cleansing breath, trying to regain what is left of my balance.

No man has ever affected me like Grayson Maury, and I cannot understand why.

Is it his appearance? His civility, his wealth, his power, I do not understand my irrational reaction.

I breathe a huge sigh of relief. What is the name of Heaven was about learning against one of the building's steel pillars, I valiantly tried to calm down and collect my thoughts? I shake my head. Holy shit - what was that? My heart is stabilizing at its steady pace, and I can breathe normally again. I head for the car.

As I leave the city limits, I start to feel stupid and embarrassed as I replay the interview in my mind. Surely, I am overreacting to something imaginary. Okay, so he is extremely attractive, confident, commanding, at ease with himself - but on the other hand, he is arrogant, and despite all his impeccable manners, he is autocratic and cold. Well, on the surface.

An involuntary shiver runs through my spine. He might be arrogant, but then he has a right to be - the accomplished so much at such an early age. He does not gladly suffer fools, but why should he again? I am irritated that Maury did not give me a brief bio.

As I navigate along I-5, my mind continues to wander. I am puzzled as to what motivates someone to be successful. Some of his answers were so cryptic - like he had a hidden agenda. And Maury's questions - ugh! Adoption and ask him if he was gay! I am shivering. I cannot believe I said that. Ground, swallow me up now! Whenever I think about this question in the future, I will cringe in embarrassment. Damn Mary Smith!

I check the speedometer. I drive more carefully than I would on another occasion. And I know it is the memory of two penetrating gray eyes staring at me, and a stern voice telling me to drive carefully. Shaking my head, I realize that Maury is more like a man who doubles his age.

Forget it, Naddalin, I am scolding myself. I decided that overall, it has been a remarkably interesting experience, but I should not dwell on it. Put it behind you. I

never have to see him again. I am immediately acclaimed by this thought. I turn on the MP3 player and turn up the volume, sit down and listen to indie rock music while pressing the accelerator.

By hitting 1-5, I realize that I can drive as fast as I want.

We live in a small community of duplex apartments in York, Washington, close to the York campus of OVHS. I am lucky - Maury's parents bought the place for her, and I am paying peanuts for the rent. He has been home for four years now. As I step outside, I know Maury is going to want a detailed report, and she is tenacious. At least she has the mini-disc. I hope I do not have to elaborate much beyond what was said during the interview.

'Naddalin! You're back.' Maury is sitting in our living room surrounded by books. She is studying for the finals - although she is still in her pink flannel pajamas decorated with cute little bunnies, the ones she keeps for the aftermath of her break-up with boyfriends, for various illnesses, and bad depression. general mood. She leaps up to me and hugs me tightly.

'I was starting to worry. I expected you to come back sooner.'

'Oh, I thought I had an enjoyable time because the interview was over.' I wave my hand at the mini-disc burner.

'Naddalin, thank you so much for doing this. I owe you; I know. What was it like? How was it?' Oh no - there we are, the Murray Smith Inquisition.

I find it difficult to answer his question. What can I say?

'I'm glad it's over, and I don't have to see him again. He was kind of intimidating, you know.' I shrug my shoulders. 'He's extremely focused, intense even - and young. Really young.'

Maury looks at me innocently. I frown at him.

'Don't you look so innocent? Why didn't you give me a biography? Maury squeezes a hand over his mouth.

'Damn, Naddalin, I'm sorry - I didn't think so.'

I blow.

'Most of the time he was courteous, formal, a little stuffy - like he was old before his time. He does not speak like a twenty-year-old man. How old is he anyway?

'Twenty-seven. Damn, Naddalin, I am sorry. I should have informed you, but I was in such a panic. Let me have the mini-

disc, and I'll start transcribing the interview.'

'You look better. Did you eat your soup?' I ask, eager to change the subject.

'Yes, and it was delicious as usual. I feel a lot better.' She smiles at me gratefully. I am looking at my watch.

'I have to run. I can still do my shift at Eastwood.'

'Naddalin, you will be exhausted.

'I'm fine. I'll see you later.'

I have been with Eastwood since I started at OVHS. It is the largest independent hardware store in the Pittsburgh area, and over the four years I have worked here I have grown to know a bit more about everything we sell - although, ironically, I am. crap in any DIY. I leave it all to my father. I am much more of a girl curled up with a book in a comfortable chair by the fire. I am glad I can make my change because it gives me something to focus on, it is not Grayson Maury. We are busy - it is the start of the summer season, and people are redecorating their homes. Mrs. Eastwood is happy to see me.

'Naddalin! I thought you weren't coming today.'

'My date didn't last as long as I thought. I can do a few hours.'

'I am so glad to see you.'

She sends me to the store to start restocking the shelves, and I am soon absorbed in the task.

When I get home later, Maury is wearing headphones and working on her laptop.

Her nose is still pink, but she has teeth in a story, so she concentrates and bangs furiously. I am completely exhausted - exhausted from the long drive, grueling maintenance, and being rushed to Eastwood's. I collapse on the couch, thinking about the essay I need to complete and all the studies I did not do today because I was stuck with... him.

'You have good things here, Naddalin. Good game. I cannot believe you did not agree to show you around. He wanted to spend more time with you.

She gives me a fleeting questioning look.

I blush and my heart rate increases inexplicably. Surely that was not the reason he just wanted to show me around so I could see that he was the expert in everything he investigated. I realize I am biting my lip and I hope Maury does not

notice. But she seems absorbed in her transcription. 'I mean what you mean by formal. Did you take any notes?' she asks.

'Uh... no, I didn't.'

'That's good. I can still make a complimentary article with that. Too bad we do not have original photos. Beautiful son of a bitch, right?'

I rinse.

'I suppose.' I try to appear disinterested and think I am successful.

'Oh, come on, Naddalin - even you can't be immune to her appearance.' She arched a perfect eyebrow at me.

Shit! I distracted her with flattery, always a good ploy.

'You probably would have gotten a lot more from him.'

'I doubt it, Naddalin. Come on - he practically offered you a job. Since I forced this on you at the last minute, you did very well. She looks at me speculatively. I make a hasty retreat into the kitchen.

'So, what did you really think of him?' Damn, she is curious. Why can't she just let it go?

'He's very driven, controlling, arrogant - scary really, but very charismatic. I can understand the fascination, 'I add honestly, as I look around

the door, hoping that will silence her for the last time.

'You, fascinated by a man, this is a first,' she sniffs.

I start to put together the ingredients for a sandwich so she cannot see my face.

'Why did you want to know if he was gay? That was the most embarrassing question. I was mortified, and he was pissed off that he was being asked too.' I frown at the memory.

'Whenever he's on the pages of the company, he never has a date.'

'It was embarrassing. It was all embarrassing. Glad I never have to watch it again.

'Oh, Naddalin, it couldn't have been that bad. He seems pretty taken with you.

Caught With Me Now Maury is ridiculous.

'Do you want a sandwich?'

'Please.'

We are not talking about Grayson Maury again that night, much to my relief. After we have eaten, I can sit at the dining table with Maury, and while she is working on her article, I am working on my essay on Tess des D'Urbervilles. Damn, but this

woman was in the wrong place at the wrong time in the wrong century. By the time I finish, it is midnight and Maury has been in bed for a long time. I walk to my room, exhausted, but happy to have accomplished so much for a Monday.

I snuggle up in my tin bed, wrapping my mom's quilt around me, close my eyes, and fall asleep instantly. That night, I dream of dark places, cold white floors, and gray eyes.

The rest of the week I go into my studies and work at Eastwood's. Maury is also busy compiling the latest edition of her student magazine before having to hand it over to the new publisher while preparing for her finals. On Wednesday she is much better, and I no longer must put up with the sight of her pink flannel pajamas with too many bunnies. I call my mom in Georgia to check it out, but also to wish me good luck with my final exams. She keeps telling me about her latest business in candle making - my mom is all about new business ventures. She is bored and wants something to occupy her time, but she has the attention span of a goldfish. It will be something new next week.

She worries me. I hope she did not mortgage the house to fund this latest plan.

And I hope that Bob - her new but much older husband - will watch her now that I am no longer here. He seems a lot more grounded than husband number three.

'How are you with you, Naddalin?'

For a moment, I hesitate and have all of Mom's attention.

'I'm fine.'

'Naddalin Have you met anyone? Wow... how does she do that? The excitement in his voice is palpable.

'No, mom, it's okay. You'll be the first to know if I do.'

'Naddalin, you really need to get out more, honey. You worry me.'

'Mom, I'm fine. How's Bob?' As always, distraction is the best policy.

Later that evening, I called Raymond, my stepfather, mom's husband number two, the man I consider my dad, and the man I am named after. It is a brief conversation. It is not so much a conversation as it is a one-sided series of growls in response to my gentle coaxing. Ray is not a talker. But he is still alive, he still watches football on TV and goes bowling and fly fishing or making furniture when he is not. Raymond is a skilled carpenter and the reason I know the

difference between a hawk and a handsaw. Everything is fine with him.

Friday night, Maury and I are debating what to do with our night - we want some time away from our studies, our work, and the student papers - when the doorbell rings.

Standing at our door is my good friend, Sam, holding a bottle of champagne.

'Sam! Nice to see you!' I give him a quick hug. 'Come in.'

Sam is the first person I met when I arrived at OVHS looking as lost and alone as I was.

We recognized a soul mate in each of us those days and have been friends ever since.

Not only do we share a good sense of humor, but we found out that Raymond and Sam Senior were together in the same military unit. As a result, our fathers also became strong friends.

Sam is studying engineering and is the first in his family to attend college. He is damn brilliant, but his real passion is photography. Sam's eye for a good photo.

'I have news.' He smiles, his dark eyes twinkling.

'Don't tell me - you've been, he made it to not get kicked out for another

week,' I tease, and he scowls playfully at me.

'The Pittsburgh Place Gallery will be exhibiting my photos next month.'

'It's amazing - congratulations!' Delighted for him, I hug him again. Maury also shines.

'Well done, Sam! I should put this in the newspaper. Nothing like last minute editorial changes on a Friday night.' She smiles.

'Let us celebrate. I want you to come to the opening.' Sam looks at me intently. I rinse.

'You two, of course,' he adds, giving Maury a nervous look.

Sam and I are good friends, but I know deep down that he would like to be more. He is cute and funny, but he is just not for me. He is more like the brother I have ever had. Maury often teases me that I miss the boyfriend needed gene, but the truth is I have not just met anyone who... well, who I am drawn to, even though a part of me longs for those. trembling knees, heart in my mouth, butterflies in my stomach, sleepless nights.

Sometimes, I wonder if there is something wrong with me. I have spent too much time in the company of my romantic

literary heroes, and therefore my ideals and expectations are far too high. But in reality, no one has ever made me feel that way.

Until very recently, the annoying little voice of my subconscious whispered.

NO! I banish the thought immediately. I am not going, not after this painful interview. Are you gay, Mr. Maury, I scowl at the memory? I know I have dreamed about him most nights since, but it is just to purge the terrible experience from my system, surely?

I watch Sam open the bottle of champagne. He is tall, and in his jeans and t-shirt, he has shoulders and muscles, tanned skin, black hair, and burning black eyes. Yes, Sam is hot, but he finally gets the message: we are just friends. The cork makes a loud noise, and Sam looks up and smiles.

Saturday at the store is a nightmare. We are besieged by repair people who want to beautify their homes. Mr. and Mrs. Eastwood, John, and Patrick - the other two part-time employees- and I are all rushed. But there is a lull around lunchtime, and Mrs. Eastwood asks me to check some orders while I sit behind the counter at the checkout discreetly eating my bagel. I am engrossed in the task,

checking the catalog numbers against the items we need and the items we have ordered, my eyes moving from the order book to the computer screen and back as I check that the entries match. Then, for some reason, I look up... and find myself locked in the gray, daring gaze of Grayson Maury who is standing at the counter and watching me intently.

Heart failure.

'Miss Black. What a pleasant surprise.' His gaze is unwavering and intense.

Holy shit. What is he doing here with all the tousled hair and the outdoors in his cream chunky knit sweater, jeans, and walking boots? I think my mouth has opened and I cannot locate my brain or voice.

'Mr. Maury, 'I whisper because that is all I can do. There is a smile ghost on his lips and his eyes shine with humor like he is enjoying a private joke.

'I was in the area,' he says in explanation. 'I need to stock up on a few things.

It is good to see you again, Miss Black. Her voice is warm and hoarse like melted chocolate caramel... or something like that.

I shake my head to come to my senses. My heart beats a frenetic tattoo, and for some reason, I blushed furiously under its constant scrutiny. I am completely bowled over by the sight of him standing in front of me. My memories of him did not do him justice. He is not just handsome - he is the epitome of male beauty, breathtaking, and he is here. Here in the Eastwood hardware store. Go figure it out. Finally, my cognitive functions are restored and reconnected with the rest of my body.

'Naddalin. My name is Naddalin,' I mumble. 'How can I help you, Mr. Maury?'

He smiles, and again, it is like he knows a big secret. It is so confusing. Taking a deep breath, I put on the professional facade that I have worked in this shop for years. I can do it.

'There are a few items that I need. For starters, I would like some cable ties,' he murmurs, his gray eyes cold but amused.

Cable ties?

'We have several lengths in stock. Shall I show you?' I whisper, my voice is soft and hesitant.

Catch yourself, Black. A slight frown shakes Maury's charming forehead.

'Please. Show the way, Miss Black,' he said. I try to be nonchalant as I step out

from behind the counter, but I focus on not falling over my own feet - my legs are suddenly the consistency of Jell-O. I am so glad I decided to wear my best jeans this morning.

'They're with the electrical appliances, aisle eight.' My voice is a little too bright. I look at it and regret it almost immediately. Damn, he is handsome. I am blushing.

'After you,' he whispers, gesturing with his long-fingered, beautifully manicured hand. With my heart nearly choking - because it is in my throat trying to escape my mouth - I walk down one of the aisles to the electrical section. Why is he in Pittsburgh?

Why is he here at Eastwood's? And from a tiny, underused part of my brain - located at the base of my elongated marrow where my subconscious resides - comes the thought: it is here to see you. Certainly not! I rejected it immediately. Why would this handsome, powerful, and courteous man want to see me? The idea is absurd, and I throw it out of my head.

'Are you in Pittsburgh on business?' I ask, and my voice is too loud like my finger is stuck in a door or something. Thin! Try to be cool Naddalin!

'I was visiting the agricultural division of the OVHS. She is based in York. I'm currently funding research there in crop rotation and soil science, 'he said neutrally. See?

Not at all there to find you, my subconscious laughs at me, strong, proud, and sulky. I blush at my crazy, capricious thoughts.

'Is this all part of your Feed the World plan?' I am teasing.

'Something like that,' he admits, and his lips curl up in a half-smile.

He is looking at the selection of cable ties we stock at Eastwood. What is he going to do with those? I cannot imagine him as a repair person at all. His fingers trail through the various packages displayed, and for some inexplicable reason, I must look away. He leans over and selects a package.

'These will do,' he said with his secret smile, and I blushed.

'Is there anything else?'

'I would like duct tape.'

Masking tape?

'Are you redecorating?' The words got out before I could stop them. Surely, he hires workers or has staff to help him decorate?

'No, no redecorating,' he said quickly then smirked, and I have the strange feeling that he is laughing at me.

Am I as funny as I am funny?

'Over here,' I whispered in embarrassment. 'The masking tape is in the decor aisle.'

I look behind me as he follows him.

'Have you worked here for a long time?' His voice is low, and he looks at me, gray eyes focused. I blush even more vividly. Why does he have this effect on me?

I feel like I am fourteen - left, as always, and out of place. Eyes before Black!

'Four years,' I mumble as we reach our goal. To distract me, I lower my hand and select the two widths of masking tape we have in stock.

'I'll take that one,' Maury said quietly, gesturing to the larger strip, which I passed him.

Our fingers brush very briefly, and the current is there again, zapping through me as if I had touched a bare wire. I involuntarily gasp at the feeling, all the way to a dark, unexplored place deep in my stomach. Desperately, I seek my balance.

'Nothing else?' My voice is hoarse and panting. His eyes widened slightly.

'A little rope, I think.' His voice reflects mine, hoarse.

'This way.' I lower my head to hide my recurring blush and walk towards the aisle.

'What kind were you after? We have a synthetic and natural filament rope... twine... a cable... 'I stop at his expression, his eyes darkening. Holy cow.

'I'll take five yards of the natural filament rope please.'

Quickly, fingers shaking, I measure five meters against the fixed ruler, aware that his gray, burning gaze is on me. I dare not look at him. Jeez, could I be more embarrassed as I pull my Stanley knife out of the back pocket of my jeans, cut it then roll it up neatly before tying it into a slip knot. Miraculously, I managed not to remove a finger with my knife. 'Were you a Girl Scout? he asks, sculpted, sultry lips curled in amusement. Do not look at his mouth! 'Organized group activities aren't my thing, Mr. Maury.

He arched an eyebrow. 'What's your thing, Naddalin?' he asks, his voice soft and his secret smile is back. I watch him unable to express myself. I am on moving tectonic plates. Try to be cool,

Naddalin, my tortured subconscious begs on bent knees.

'Books,' I whisper, but inside my subconscious screams: You! You are my thing! I slap him instantly, mortified that my psyche has ideas above his station. 'What kind of books?' He tilts his head to one side. Why is he so interested? 'Oh, you know. The usual. The classics. British literature, mostly.' He rubs his chin with his long index finger and thumb as he contemplates my response. Or he is bored and trying to hide it.

'Do you need anything else? I must leave this topic - those fingers on this face are so alluring. 'I don't know. What else would you recommend?' What would I recommend? I do not even know what you are doing. 'For a repair person?' He nods, gray eyes full of wicked humor. I blush and my eyes stray on their own to her tight jeans.

'Combination,' I reply and know that I no longer watch what comes out of my mouth. He raises an eyebrow, amused, once again. 'You wouldn't want to ruin your clothes,' I wave vaguely towards her jeans. 'I could always take them off.' He smiles. 'Uh.' I feel the color of my cheeks rising again. I must be the color of the Communist

manifesto. Stop talking. Stop talking NOW. 'I'll take combinations. God keep me from ruining my clothes, 'he said dryly. I try to dismiss the unwelcome image of him without jeans. 'Do you need anything else?' I squeak as I hand him the blue jumpsuit.

He ignores my request. 'How's the article doing?' He finally asked me a normal question, far from all the innuendo and confusing double talk... a question I can answer. I grasp it firmly with both hands as if it were a life raft and opt for honesty. 'I don't write it, Maury is. Miss Smith. My roommate, she is the writer. She is incredibly happy about it. She is the editor of the magazine, and she was devastated that she could not. do the interview in person. ' I feel like I'm getting some fresh air - well, a normal topic of conversation. 'Her only concern is that she doesn't have any original photos of you.'

Maury raises an eyebrow. 'What kind of photographs does she want?' Okay. I had not taken this answer into account. I shake my head because I just do not know. 'Well, here I am. Tomorrow, maybe… 'He pauses. 'Would you be ready to attend a photoshoot?' My voice cracks again. Maury will be in seventh heaven if I can pull it off. And you could see him again tomorrow,

that dark place at the base of my brain whispers seductively to me. I dismiss the thought - of all the stupid, ridiculous... 'Maury will be delighted - if we can find a photographer.' I am so happy; I smile broadly at him. His lip's part, as if taking a deep breath, and he blinks. For a split second, it somehow seems lost, and the Earth shifts slightly on its axis, the tectonic plates sliding into a new position. Oh my. The lost gaze of Grayson Maury. 'Let me know for tomorrow.'

Slitting his hand in his back pocket, he pulls out his wallet. 'My card. It has my cell phone number on it. You'll have to call before ten in the morning.' 'Okay.' I smile at him. Maury will be delighted. 'Naddalin! Paul materialized at the other end of the aisle. He is Mr. Eastwood's younger brother. I had heard that he had returned from Princeton, but I did not expect to see him today. 'Uh, excuse me for a second, Mr. Maury. Maury frowns as I turn away from him. Paul has always been a friend, and in this weird moment that I experience with Maury, a control freak, rich, powerful, and incredibly offbeat, it is great to talk to someone normal. Paul hugs me tightly, taking me by surprise.

'Naddalin, hi, it's so good to see you!' it gushes out. 'Hi Paul, how are you home for your brother's birthday?' 'Yes. You look good, Naddalin, really good.' He smiles as he examines me at arm's length. Then he releases me but keeps a possessive arm draped over my shoulder. I drag myself from foot to foot, embarrassed. It is good to see Paul, but he has always been too familiar. When I look at Grayson Murray, he looks at us like a hawk, his hooded, speculative gray eyes, his mouth a hard, unmoved line. He went from being strangely attentive to someone else - someone cold and distant.

'Paul, I'm with a client. Someone you should meet,' I said, trying to defuse the antagonism I see in Maury's eyes. I drag Paul to meet him, and they weigh each other. The atmosphere is suddenly arctic. 'Uh, Paul, this is Grayson Maury. Mr. Maury, this is Paul Eastwood. His brother owns the place.' And for some irrational reason, I feel like I must explain a little more. 'I've known Paul since working here, although we don't see each other often. He's back from Princeton studying business administration.' I am babbling... stop now! 'Mr. Eastwood. Grayson holds out his hand, his gaze was unreadable.

'Mr. Maury, 'Paul returned his handshake. 'Wait - not the Grayson Murray from Murray Enterprises Handling?' Paul goes from gruff to amazing in less than a nanosecond. Maury gives him a polite smile that does not reach his eyes. 'Wow - is there anything I can offer you?' 'Naddalin has it all covered, Mr. Eastwood. She was very attentive. His expression is deadpan, but his words... it is like he is saying something quite different. It is confusing. 'Cool,' Paul replies. 'Catch yourself later, Naddalin.' 'Of course, Paul. I watch him disappear towards the reserve. 'Is there anything else, Mr. Maury?' 'Just these items.'

His tone is muted and cold. Damn... I offended him by taking a deep breath, I turned around and walked over to the cash register. What is his problem? I call the rope, jumpsuit, masking tape, and cable ties at checkout. 'It will be forty-three dollars, please.' I am looking at Murray and wish I had not. He looks at me closely, his gray eyes intense and smoky. It is disconcerting. 'Would you like a bag?' I ask by taking his credit card. 'Please, Naddalin. Her tongue caresses my name, and my heart is frantic again. I can hardly breathe.

In a hurry, I place his purchases in a plastic rack. 'Will you call me if you want

me to do the photoshoot?' It is once again for business. I nod, again speechless, and give him back his credit card. 'Good. Until tomorrow maybe.' He turns to leave, then stops. 'Oh - and Naddalin, I'm glad Miss Smith couldn't do the interview.' He smiles, then walks out of the store with renewed purpose, slipping the plastic bag over his shoulder, leaving me with a shaking mass of raging female hormones. I spend several minutes staring at the closed door he just left before returning to planet Earth. All right - I like it.

There, I admitted it myself. I cannot hide from my feelings anymore. Photo, shootout this before. I find him attractive, incredibly attractive. But it is a lost cause, I know, and I sigh with bittersweet regret. It was just a coincidence that he came here. But still, I can admire it from afar, surely no harm can result from it. And if I find a photographer, I can do some serious admiration tomorrow. I bite my lip in anticipation and find myself smiling like a schoolchild. I need to phone Maury and set up a photo shoot.

Maury is ecstatic.

'But what was he doing at Eastwood's?' Her curiosity oozes through

the phone. I am at the back of the storage room, trying to keep my voice relaxed.

'He was in the area.'

'I think it's a huge coincidence, Naddalin. Don't you think he was there to see you?

she speculates. My heart wavers at the prospect, but it is a short-lived joy. The drab and disappointing reality is that he was here on business.

'He was visiting the agricultural division of OVHS. He funds research,' I mumble.

'Oh yes. He gave the department a $ 5.5 million grant.'

Wow.

'How do you know that?'

'Naddalin, I'm a journalist, and I wrote a profile on the guy. It's my job to find out.'

'Alright, Carla Bernstein, keep your hair. So, you want these pictures?'

'Of course, I do. The question is who is going to do them and where.'

'We could ask him were. He says he's staying in the area.'

'Can you contact him?'

'I have his cell number.'

Maury gasps.

'The richest, most elusive and enigmatic bachelor in Washington State, just gave you his cell phone number.'

'Um yes.'

'Naddalin! He likes you. No doubt about it.' His tone is categorical.

'Maury, he's just trying to be nice.' But even when I say the words, I know they are not true.

- Grayson Maury is not doing well. He is polite. And a soft little voice whispers, Maury is right. My scalp itches at the thought that just maybe, he could love me. He said he was glad Maury did not do the interview. I hug in quiet glee, rocking side to side, thinking of the possibility of him liking me for a moment. Maury brings me back to the now.

'I don't know who we'll be filming. Levi, our regular photographer, cannot.

He is at home in Idaho Falls for the weekend. leading entrepreneurs. '

'Hmm... What about Sam?'

'Great idea! Ask him - he will do anything for you. So, call Maury and find out where he wants us.' Maury is cavalier about Sam.

'I think you should call him.'

'Who, Sam? Maury laughs.

'No, Maury.

'Naddalin, you have the relationship.'

'Relationship?' I squeak at him, my voice rising several octaves. 'I barely know the guy.' 'At least you have met him,' she said bitterly. 'And it looks like he wants to get to know you better. Naddalin, call him,' she slams and hangs up. She is so bossy sometimes. I frown at my cell, sticking my tongue out.

I am just leaving a message for Sam when Paul walks into the storeroom looking for sandpaper.

'We're pretty busy over there, Naddalin,' he said without acrimony.

'Yes, uh, sorry,' I mumble, turning to leave.

'So how come you know Grayson Maury?' Paul's voice is unconvincingly nonchalant.

'I must have interviewed him for our student newspaper. Maury was not doing well.' I shrug, trying to look relaxed and not doing any better than him.

'Grayson Maury at Eastwood's. Go figure,' Paul growled in astonishment. He shakes his head as if to clear it up. 'Anyway, do you want a drink or something tonight?'

Every time he is home he asks me for a date, and I always say no. It is a ritual.

I never considered it an innovative idea to date the boss's brother, and besides, Paul is cute as an all-American boy next door, but he is not a literary hero, not at all. imagination. Maury asks my subconscious, his eyebrow figuratively raised.

I slap her.

'Don't you have a family dinner or something for your brother?'

'It's tomorrow.'

'Another time, Paul. I need to study tonight. I have my finals next week.'

'Naddalin, one of these days you'll say yes,' he smirked as I escaped into the store.

'But I do places, Naddalin, not people,' Sam moaned.

'Sam, please? I beg you. Gripping my cell, I walk around the living room of our apartment, looking out the window at the fading evening light.

'Give me that phone.' Maury grabs the receiver from me, throwing her silky red, blonde hair over her shoulder.

'Listen here, Sam Rodriquez, if you want our newspaper to cover the opening of your show, will you do this shoot for us tomorrow, capiche?' Maury can be incredibly tough.

'Good. Naddalin will call you back with the time and place of the call. We'll see you tomorrow.' She turns off my cell phone.

'Sorted out. All we need to do now is decide where and when. Call him.' She hands me the phone. My stomach twists.

'Call Maury now!'

I scowl at her and search my back pocket for her business card. I take a deep breath, and with trembling fingers, I dial the number.

He answers on the second ring. His tone is muted, calm, and cold.

'Maury.

'Uh... Naddalin Black from Mr. Maury.' I do not recognize my voice; I am so nervous. There is a brief pause. Inside, I am shaking.

'Miss Black. It's nice to hear from you.' His voice has changed. He is surprised, I think, and he looks so... warm - even handsome. My breathing stops and I blush. I suddenly realize that Mary Smith is looking at me with his mouth open, and I rush into the kitchen to avoid his unwanted examination.

'Um - we would like to continue with the photoshoot for the article.' Breathe, Naddalin, breathe.

My lungs are dragging in a rushed breath. 'Tomorrow, if it's okay. Where would it suit you, sir?'

I can almost hear his sphinx smile through the phone.

'I'm staying at the Heathman in Pittsburgh. Shall we say, nine-thirty tomorrow morning?' ' Okay, we will see you there. 'I'm all gushing and panting - like a child, not a grown woman who can legally vote and drink in Washington state.

'I can't wait to be there, Miss Black.' I visualize the wicked glint in his gray eyes. How can he get seven little words to contain so many enticing promises that I hang up? Maury is in the kitchen, and she looks at me with a look of utter dismay on her face.

'Naddalin Rose Black. You like him! I have never seen or heard you, so… affected by anyone before. You blush.

'Oh Maury, you know I blush all the time. It is a professional risk with me. Don't be so ridiculous,' I crack. She blinks at me in surprise - I very rarely throw my toys out of the pram - and briefly give in. 'I just find him… intimidating, that's all.'

'Heathman, it figures,' Maury mumbles. 'I'll call them and negotiate a space for the shoot.'

'I'm going to cook supper. Then I need to study.' I cannot hide my irritation with her as I open one of the cupboards to prepare supper.

I am restless that night, I turn around and turn around. Dreaming about smoky gray eyes, coveralls, long legs, long fingers, and dark and gloomy unexplored places. I wake up twice in the night, my heart is pounding. Oh, I am going to look great tomorrow with so little sleep, I am scolding myself. I hit my pillow and tried to settle down.

The Heathman is nestled in the heart of downtown Pittsburgh. Its impressive brownstone building was completed just in time for the crash of the late 1920s. Sam, Travis, and I are traveling in my Beetle, and Maury is in his CLK because we cannot all fit in my car. Travis is Sam's friend and gopher, here to help with the lighting. Maury arranged for me to acquire free use of a room at the Heathman for the morning in exchange for a credit in the article. When she explains to the front desk that we are here to photograph Grayson CEO Maury, we are instantly upgraded to a suit. Just a full-size suite, however, as apparently Mr. Maury already occupies the largest of the building. An

overly enthusiastic marketing manager shows us the next step - he is young and extremely nervous for some reason.

I suspect it is Maury's beauty and imposing manner that disarms him shootout because he is putty in his hands. The rooms are elegant, sober, and richly furnished.

It is nine o'clock. We have half an hour to set up. Maury is booming,

'Sam, I think we're going to shoot that wall, are you okay?' She is not waiting for his answer. 'Travis, get rid of the chairs. Naddalin, could you ask housekeeping to bring some refreshments and let Maury know where we are.

Yes, head of household. She is so domineering. I roll my eyes but do as I am telling.

Half an hour later, Grayson Maury enters our suite.

Holy Crap! He wears a white shirt open at the collar and Maury flannel pants that hang from his hips. Her unruly hair is still damp from a shower. My mouth goes dry looking at him... he is so hot. Maury is followed next by a man in his thirties, all shaven and stubble in a dark suit and tie who stands silently in the corner. His hazel eyes gaze at us impassively.

'Miss Black, we meet again.' Maury reaches out and I squeeze it, blinking quickly.

Oh my... he is really, rather... wow. As I touch her hand, I am aware of this delicious current flowing through me, lighting up, making me blush, and I am sure my erratic breathing must be audible.

'Mr. Maury, this is Mary Smith, 'I mumble, waving a hand at the coming Murray, looking him straight in the eye.

'The tenacious Miss Smith. How are you?' He gives her a small smile, looking amused. 'I hope you're feeling better, Naddalin said you weren't well last week.'

'I'm fine, thank you, Mr. Maury.' She squeezes his hand firmly without batting an eyelid.

I remember Maury going to the best private schools in Washington. Her family has money, and she grew up confident and sure of her place in the world. She does not take any shit. I am in awe of her.

'Thanks for taking the time to do this.' She gives him a polite and professional smile.

'It's a pleasure,' he replies, turning his gray gaze to me, and I blush again. Damn it.

'This is Sam Black, our photographer,' I said smiling at Sam who smiled affectionately at me. His eyes go cold as he looks from me to Maury.

'Mr. Maury, 'he nods.

'Mr. Black,' Maury's expression also changes as he assesses Sam.

'Where do you want me to?' Maury asks him. His tone seems vaguely threatening. But Maury is not about to let Sam run the show.

'Mr. Maury - if you could sit here, please watch out for the light cables. And then we'll do some standing as well.' She directs him to a chair leaning against the wall.

Travis turns on the lights, momentarily blinding Maury, and mumbles an apology.

Then Travis and I pull back and watch Sam start to pull away. He takes several pictures in his hand, asking Maury to turn in that direction, then that, to move his arm, then to put it back. Moving to the tripod, Sam picks up several more, while Maury sits and poses, patiently and naturally, for about twenty minutes. My

wish has come true: I can stand and admire Maury from not so far away. Twice our eyes lock, and I must tear myself away from his cloudy gaze.

'Seated enough.' Maury enters again. 'Up, Mr. Maury?' she asks.

He gets up and Travis rushes over to remove the chair. Sam's Nikon shutter starts clicking again.

'I think we've had enough,' Sam announces five minutes later.

'Awesome,' Maury said. 'Thanks again, Mr. Maury. She shakes his hand, as does Sam.

'Can't wait to read the article, Miss Smith,' Maury mutters, and turns to me, standing by the door. 'Are you going to walk with me, Miss Black?' He asks.

'Of course,' I said, completely bowled over. I glanced anxiously at Murray, who shrugs. I notice Sam scowling behind her.

'Hello everyone,' Maury said as he opened the door, stepping aside to let me out first.

Holy shit... what the fuck does he want? I stop in the hallway of the hotel, stirring nervously as Maury exits the room, followed by Mr. Buzz-Cut in his pointy suit.

'I'll call you, Stephen,' he whispers to Buzz-Cut. Stephen returns to the hallway and Maury turns his gray, burning gaze to me. Damn... did I do something wrong?

'I wondered if you would join me for coffee this morning.

My heart slams in my mouth. A date Grayson Maury asks me for a date. He asks you if you want a coffee. He thinks you have not woken up yet, my subconscious moaned at me again in a sneering mood. I clear my throat trying to control my nerves.

'I have to get everyone home,' I whisper, wringing my hands and fingers in front of me.

'STEPHEN,' he calls, making me jump. Stephen, who had retired into the hallway, turns and walks towards us.

'Are they based at the university?' Maury asks, her voice soft and questioning. I nod, too stunned to speak.

'Stephen can take them. He is my driver. We have a big 4x4 here, so he can take the equipment as well.'

'Mr. Maury? Stephen asks when he reaches us, giving nothing.

'Please can you bring the photographer, his assistant and Miss Smith home?'

'Certainly, sir,' Stephen replies.

'There. Now can you join me for a coffee?' Maury smiles like it is a done deal.

I frown at him.

'Um - Mr. Maury, uh - this is really... look, Stephen doesn't have to bring them home.' I take a brief coup d ' eye to Stephen, who remains stoically impassive. 'I'll trade vehicles with Maury if you give me a moment.'

Maury smiled a dazzling, unguarded, natural, jagged, glorious smile. Oh my... and he opens the door to the suite so I can go inside. I walk around him to enter the room, finding Maury in deep discussion with Sam.

'Naddalin, he really loves you,' she said without any preamble. Sam looks at me with disapproval. 'But I don't trust him,' she adds. I raise my hand in the hope that she stops talking. Miraculously, she does.

'Maury, if you take the Beetle, can I take your car?'

'Why?'

'Grayson Maury asked me to have coffee with him.'

Her mouth opens. Murray speechless! I savor the moment. She grabs me by the arm and leads me into the bedroom which is next to the living room of the suite.

'Naddalin, there is something about him. His tone is full of warning. 'He's beautiful, I agree, but I think he's dangerous. Especially for someone like you.

'What do you mean, someone like me?' I ask, offended.

'An innocent girl like you, Naddalin. You know what I mean,' she said, a little irritated. I rinse.

'Maury, it's just coffee. I'm starting my exams this week, and I need to study, so I won't be long.'

She pursues her lips as if considering my request. Finally, she takes her car keys out of her pocket and hands them to me. I give him mine.

'I'll see you later. Don't be long, or I'll send search and rescue.'

'Thank you.' I hug her.

I step out of the suite to find Grayson Maury waiting, leaning against the wall, looking like a model in a pose for a shiny high-end magazine.

'All right, let us make some coffee,' I whisper, rinsing a beetroot.

He smiles.

'After you, Miss Black. He stands up straight, holding out his hand for me to start.

I push my way down the hall, my knees shaking, my stomach full of butterflies, and my heart in my mouth pounding a dramatic irregular beat. I am going for coffee with Grayson Maury... and I hate coffee.

We walk together down the wide hallway of the hotel to the elevators. What should I tell him? My mind is suddenly paralyzed with apprehension. What are we going to talk about?

What do I have in common with him? Her soft and warm voice surprises me with my reverie.

'How long have you known Maury?'

Oh, easy questions to start with.

'Since our first year. She's a good friend.'

'Hmm,' he replies, without commitment. What is he thinking about?

At the elevators, he presses the call button and the bell rings almost immediately. The doors open, revealing a young couple in a passionate clinch inside. Surprised and embarrassed, they jump aside, staring guiltily in all directions except ours. Maury and I get on the elevator.

I find it hard to keep a straight face, so I look at the floor, feeling my

cheeks turn pink. When I look at Maury through my lashes he has a hint of a smile on his lips, but it is extremely hard to tell. The young couple says nothing, and we go down to the first floor in embarrassed silence. We do not even have trashy background music to distract us.

The doors open and, to my surprise, Maury takes my hand and squeezes it with his long, cold fingers. I can feel the current flowing through me, and my already fast heartbeat quickens. As he leads me out of the elevator, we can hear the couple's suppressed laughter erupt behind us. Maury smiles.

'What is it for the elevators?' he mumbles.

We walk through the spacious and bustling lobby of the hotel towards the entrance, but Maury avoids the revolving door, and I wonder if that is because he should let go of my hand.

Outside, it is a mild Sunday in May. The sun is shining, and the traffic is light. Maury turns left and heads around the corner, where we stop to wait for the crosswalk lights to change. He still holds my hand. I am on the street and Grayson Maury is holding my hand. No one has ever held my hand. I feel dizzy and sting all over

the place. I try to stifle the ridiculous smile that threatens to split my face in two. Try to be cool, Naddalin, my subconscious is begging me. The green man appears, and we leave.

We walk four blocks before reaching the Pittsburgh Coffee House, where Maury frees me to hold the door open so I can enter.

'Why don't you pick a table while I get the drinks. What do you want?' he asks, polite as always.

'I'm going to have... uh - English breakfast tea, bag.'

He raises his eyebrows.

'No coffee?

'I do not like coffee.'

He smiles.

'Okay, take some tea. Sugar?'

For a moment, I am stunned, thinking it is an ailment, but luckily my subconscious between pursed lips. No, stupid - do you have sugar?

'No thanks.' I look at my knotted fingers.

'Something to eat?'

'No thanks.' I shake my head and he walks over to the counter.

I watch him surreptitiously under my lashes as he lines up waiting to be

served. I could watch him all day… he is tall, wide, and thin, and the way those pants hang from his hips… Oh my gosh. Once or twice, he runs his long, Billie full fingers through her now dry but still messy hair. Hmm... I would like to do that. This thought spontaneously comes to my mind and my face ignites. I bite my lip and look at my hands again, not liking where my wayward thoughts are going.

'Penny for your thoughts?' Maury is back, surprising me.

I turn crimson. I was just thinking to run my fingers through your hair and wonder if it would be soft to the touch. I shake my head. He carries a tray which he places on the small round birch veneer table. He hands me a cup and saucer, a small teapot, and a side plate with a single tea bag titled 'Twinings English Breakfast' - my favorite. It has a coffee that has a beautiful leaf design imprinted in the milk. How do they do this? I walk around with folded arms. He also bought himself a blueberry muffin. Putting the tray aside, he sits down across from me and crosses his long legs. He looks so comfortable, so comfortable with his body, I envy him. Here I am, all disgusting and uncoordinated,

barely able to get from A to B without falling face down.

'Your thoughts?' He invites me. 'It's my favorite tea.' My voice is calm, panting. I just cannot believe I am sitting across from Grayson Maury at a cafe in Pittsburgh. He frowns. He knows I am hiding something. I put the teabag in the teapot and fish it out almost immediately with my teaspoon. As I put the used tea bag back on the side plate, he tilted his head, looking at me questioningly. 'I like my weak black tea,' I mumble in explanation. 'I see. Is this your boyfriend?' Whoa... What is 'Who?' 'The photographer. Sam Black.' I laugh, nervous but curious. What gave him that impression? 'No. Sam is a good friend of mine, that's all. Why did you think he was my boyfriend?'

'The way you smiled at him, and him at you.' His gray gaze holds mine back. He is so annoying. I want to look away, but I am taken - bewitched. 'He's more like family,' I whisper. Maury nods slightly, pleased with my answer, and looks at his blueberry muffin. His long fingers deftly unhook the paper, and I watch, fascinated. 'Do you want some?' he asks, and that amused, secretive smile is back. 'No thanks.' I frown and look at my hands

again. 'And the boy I met yesterday at the store. Isn't that your boyfriend? 'No. Paul is just a friend. I told you yesterday.' Oh, this is getting silly. 'Why do you ask?' You seem nervous around men. 'Holy shit, this is personal. I'm just nervous around you, Maury.' I find you intimidating. 'I blush scarlet, but mentally pat myself on the back for my candor and look at my hands again. I hear his strong breath.' You should find me intimidating, 'he nods.' You are very honest. Please do not look down.

I like to see your face. 'Oh. I look at him, and he gives me an encouraging but ironic smile.' That gives me clue to what you might be thinking, 'he huffed.' You are a mystery, Miss Black. Mysterious me? 'There is nothing mysterious about me.' 'You are very independent,' he whispers. Does I Wow... how do I handle this? It is disconcerting. Me, autonomous? Certainly not. 'Except when you are blushing, of course, which is often the case. I just wish I knew what you were blushing for. He puts a small piece of muffin in his mouth and begins to chew it slowly, not taking his eyes off me. And at the right time, I blush. Shit! 'Do you still make such personal observations?' 'I didn't realize I was. Have I offended you? He looks surprised.

'No,' I answer honestly. 'Good.' 'But you are very bossy,' I counteract softly. He raises his eyebrows and, if I am not mistaken, he blushes slightly too. 'I'm used to going my way, Naddalin,' he whispers. 'In all things.' 'I don't doubt it. Why didn't you ask me to call you by your first name?' I am surprised by my daring. Why has this conversation become so serious? This is not going as I thought. I cannot believe I feel so antagonistic to him. It is like he is trying to warn me. 'The only people who use my first name are my family and a few close friends. That's how I like it.' Oh. He still has not said, 'Call me Grayson.' He is a control freak, there is no other explanation, and part of me thinks it might have been better if Maury had interviewed him. Two control monsters together. Plus, of course, she is almost blonde - well, strawberry blond-haired person - like all the women in her office. And she is beautiful, my subconscious reminds me. I do not like the idea of Grayson and Maury. I take a sip of my tea and Maury eats another small piece of his muffin. 'Are you an only child?' He asks.

Whoa... he keeps changing direction. 'Yes.' 'Tell me about your parents.' Why does he want to know this? It

is so boring. 'My mom lives in Georgia with her new husband Bob. My stepdad lives in Montesano.' 'Your father?' 'My father died when I was a baby.' 'I'm sorry,' he mumbles, and a thrilling troubled look crosses his face. 'I don't remember him. 'And your mother remarried?' I sniffled. 'You could say that.' He frowns. 'You don't give much, do you?' he said dryly, rubbing his chin as if he was thinking deeply. 'You are neither.' 'You've interviewed me once before, and I can remember some pretty probing questions then.' He gives me a smirk. Holy shit. He remembers the 'gay' question.

Once again, I am mortified. In the years to come, I know, I will need intensive therapy so that I do not feel embarrassed whenever I remember the moment. I start babbling about my mom - anything to block that memory. 'My mother is wonderful. She is an incurable romantic. She is currently on her fourth husband.' Grayson raises his eyebrows in surprise. 'I miss her,' I continue. 'She's got Bob now. I just hope he can keep an eye on her and pick up the pieces when her wacky plans do not go as planned.' I smile affectionately. I have not seen my mother for so long. Grayson watches me intently, taking occasional sips

of his coffee. I really should not be looking at his mouth. It is troubling. Those lips. 'Do you get along well with your stepfather?'

'Sure. I grew up with him. He's the only father I know.' 'And how is he?' 'Raymond He's... taciturn. 'That's it?' Maury asks, surprised. I shrug my shoulders. What does this man expect from the story of my life? 'Taciturn like his daughter-in-law,' says Maury. I refrain from rolling my eyes at him. 'He enjoys football - European football in particular - and bowling, fly fishing, and furniture making. He is a carpenter. Ex-army.' I sigh. 'Did you live with him?' 'Yes. My mom met husband number three when I was fifteen. I stayed with Ray.' He frowns as if he does not understand. 'Didn't you want to live with your mother?' he asks. I am blushing. It is none of his business.

'My husband number three lived in Texas. My house was in Montesano. And... you know my mom just got married. I stop. My mom never talks about husband number three. Where is Maury going with this? It is none of his business. Two can play this game. 'Tell me about your parents,' I ask. He shrugs his shoulders. 'My father is a lawyer; my mother is a pediatrician. They live in New York.' Oh... he had a rich education. And I wonder about a successful

couple who adopt three children, and one of them turns into a handsome man who takes on the business world and conquers it on his own. What drove him to be like this His parents must be proud. 'What are your siblings doing?' 'Jack is under construction, and my little sister is in Paris studying cooking under the direction of a renowned French chef.' His eyes cloud with irritation. He does not want to talk about his family or himself. 'I hear that Paris is beautiful,' I whisper. Why doesn't he want to talk about his family? Is it because he was adopted? 'It's beautiful. Have you been?' he asks, his irritation forgotten. 'I have never left the Americas.' So now we come back to banalities. What is he hiding?

'Would you like to go?' 'In Paris?' I squeak. It threw me out - who would not want to go to Paris 'Of course,' I concede. 'But it is England that I would visit.' He tilts his head to one side, running his index finger over his lower lip... oh my there. 'Because?' I blink quickly. Concentrate, Black. 'This is the home of Shakespeare, Austen, the Bronte Sisters, Thomas Hardy. I would love to see the places that inspired these people to author such wonderful books. All this great literary talk reminds me that I should study. I am looking at my

watch. 'I'd better go. I have to study.' 'For your exams?' 'Yes. They start on Tuesday.' 'Where's Miss Smith's car?' 'In the hotel parking lot.' 'I'll take you home.' 'Thanks for the tea, Mr. Maury.' He smiles strangely. I have a huge secret smile. 'You're welcome, Naddalin. With pleasure. Come on, 'he orders and holds out his hand to me. I take it, puzzled, and follow it out of the cafe. We walk back to the hotel, and I would like to say that it is in pleasant silence. He at least looks like his usual calm and calm. As for me, I try desperately to gauge the progress of our little morning coffee. I feel like I have been interviewed for a job, but I am not sure what it is. 'Are you still wearing jeans?' He asks unexpectedly.

'Most.' He nods. We are back at the intersection in front of the hotel. My mind is spinning. What a strange question... And I realize that our time together is limited. That is it. That was it, and I blew it out completely, I know. He has someone. 'Do you have a girlfriend?' I let go. Holy shit - Did I just say that aloud? His lips curl up in a half-smile and he looks at me. 'No, Naddalin. I don't do the girlfriend thing,' he said softly.

Oh... what does that mean He's not gay Oh, he is - shit! He must have lied to

me during his interview. And for a moment, I think he will go on with an explanation, a clue to that cryptic statement - but he does not. I must go. I must try to collect my thoughts. I must get away from him. I walk forward and stumble, stumbling headlong on the road. 'Shit, Naddalin! Maury is crying. He pulls the hand he is holding so tight that I fall back against him just as a cyclist passes, narrowly missing me, heading the wrong way down that one-way street. It all happens so fast - one minute I am falling, the second I am in his arms, and he is holding me tight to his chest.

I breathe in its clean and vital scent. It smells of freshly washed laundry and expensive shower gel. Oh my God, it is intoxicating. I take a deep breath. 'Are you OK?' he whispers. He has one arm around me, hugging me tightly, while the fingers of his other hand gently trace my face, probing me, examining me. His thumb brushes my lower lip and I hear his heavy breathing. He looks me in the eye, and I hold his anxious, burning gaze for a while or it is forever... but eventually my attention is drawn to his beautiful mouth. Oh my. And for the first time in twenty-one years, I want to be kissed. I want to feel his mouth on me.

Kiss me fucking! I implore him, but I cannot move. I am paralyzed by a strange, unknown urge, completely captivated by it. I gaze at Grayson Maury's exquisitely sculpted mouth, mesmerized, and he stares at me, his eyes clouded, his eyes dark. He is breathing harder than usual, and I have completely stopped breathing. I am in your arms.

Kiss me, please. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and gives me a little nod as if to answer my silent question. When he opens his eyes again, it is with a new purpose, a resolution of steel.

'Naddalin, you should get away from me. I'm not the man for you, 'he whispers.

What does it come from? Surely, I should be the judge. I frown and my head swims with rejection.

'Breathe, Naddalin, breathe. I'm going to get up and let you go,' he said softly, and he gently pushes me away.

Adrenaline rushed through my body, from the near crash with the cyclist or the intoxicating proximity to Grayson, leaving me wired and weak. NO! My psyche screams as he walks away, leaving me private. He has his hands on my shoulders, holding me at arm's length, carefully

watching my reactions. And the only thing I can think of is that I wanted to be kissed, I made it pretty darn obvious, and he did not. He does not want me. He does not want me. I royally screwed up the coffee in the morning.

'I have this,' I breathe, finding my voice. 'Thank you,' I whispered in humiliation. How could I have misinterpreted the situation between us so completely that I need to get away from him?

'Why?' he frowns. He did not take my hands off.

'For saving me,' I whisper.

'That idiot was driving the wrong way. I am glad to be here. I shudder at the thought of what could have happened to you. Do you want to come and sit at the hotel for a while? He releases me, his hands by his side, and I stand in front of him, feeling like a fool.

With a shake, I clear my head. I just want to go. All my vague and unexpressed hopes have been dashed. He does not want me. What was I thinking? I scolded myself. What would Grayson Maury want from you? My subconscious is laughing at me. I wrap my arms around me and turn to face the road and find with

relief that the green man has appeared. I make my way quickly, aware that Maury is behind me. Outside the hotel, I turn briefly to face him but cannot look him in the eye.

'Thanks for the tea and the photoshoot,' I whisper.

'Naddalin... I...' He stops, and the anguish in his voice demands my attention, so I look at him unwittingly. His gray eyes are dark as he runs his hand through his hair.

He looks torn, frustrated, his expression austere, all his careful control has evaporated.

'What, Grayson? I crack in irritation after he says - nothing. I just want to go. I must take away my fragile, hurt pride, and heal it somehow.

'Good luck with your exams,' he whispers.

Therefore, he looks so sorry This is the big send-off Just to wish me luck in my exams.

'Thank you.' I cannot hide the sarcasm in my voice. 'Goodbye, Mr. Maury. I turn on my heel, vaguely surprised not to stumble, and without giving him a second look, I disappear down the sidewalk toward the underground garage.

Once under the dark, cold concrete of the garage with its dark fluorescent light, I lean against the wall and put my head in my hands. What I was thinking Unintentional and unwelcome tears flowed into my eyes. Why am I crying? I fall to the ground, angry with myself for this insane reaction. Raising my knees, I fold in on myself. I want to make myself as small as possible. This insane pain will be all the weaker the smaller I am.

As I placed my head on my knees, I let out unrestrained irrational tears. I cry because of the loss of something that I never had. It is ridiculous. Cry something that never was - my hopes dashed, my dreams dashed, and my expectations soared.

I have never been the victim of rejection. Ok... so I was always one of the last to be picked for basketball or volleyball - but I got that - running and doing something else at the same time as bouncing or throwing a bullet is not my thing. I am a serious responsibility in any sports field.

Romantically, however, I never got out, ever. A life of insecurity- I am too pale, too thin, too scruffy, uncoordinated, my extensive list of faults continues. So, I was

always the one who turned away all the admirers. There was this guy in my chemistry class who loved me, but nobody ever sparked my interest - nobody but Grayson fucking Maury. I should be nicer to Paul Eastwood and Sam Black, although I am sure neither of them was found sobbing alone in dark places.

I just need a good scream.

Stop! Stop now! - My subconscious screams at me metaphorically, arms crossed, leaning on one leg, and patting his foot in frustration. Get in the car, go home, study. Forget about him... Now! And stop all this shit wallowing in on itself.

I take a deep breath and stand up. Get it together Black. I walk over to Maury's car, wiping the tears from my face as I do. I will not think about him anymore. I can just attribute this incident to the experience and focus on my exams.

Maury is sitting at the dining table in front of her laptop when I arrive. Her welcoming smile fades when she sees me.

'Naddalin, what's wrong?'

Oh no... not the Mary Smith inquisition. I shake my head at her, stepping back now in Smith's fashion - but I might as well be dealing with a blind, deaf-mute.

'You cried', she has an exceptional gift for sometimes saying the obvious. 'What did that bastard do to you?' she growls, and her face - jeez, she scares.

'Nothing Maury. This is the problem. This thought brings a wry smile to my face. 'So why did you cry? You never cry, 'she said, her voice softening. She stands up, her green eyes full of concern. She puts her arms around me and hugs me.

I need to say something just to make her back down.

'I almost got hit by a cyclist.' It is the best I can do, but it distracts her momentarily from... him.

'Fuck Naddalin - are you ok, have you been hurt?' She holds me at arm's length and gives me a quick visual examination.

'No. Grayson saved me,' I whisper. 'But I was pretty shaken up.'

'I'm not surprised. How was the coffee? I know you hate coffee.'

'I had tea. It was fine, nothing to report really. I don't know why he asked me.'

'He likes you Naddalin.' She drops her arms.

'Not anymore. I won't see him again.' Yeah, I am doing it to sound like a fact.

'Oh?'

Shit. She is intrigued. I head for the kitchen so she cannot see my face.

'Yes… he is a little out of my league Maury,' I said as dryly as I could, I do.

'What do you mean?'

'Oh Murr, that's obvious. I turn around and face her as she stands at the kitchen door, 'Not mine,' she says. 'Okay, he has more money than you, but then he has more money than most Americans!'

'Maury, he's -' I shrug.

'Naddalin! For heaven's sake - how many times do I have to tell you that you are a total girl,' she interrupts me. Oh no. She left for this tirade.

'Maury, please. I need to study.' I interrupted her. She frowns.

'Do you want to see the article? It is over. Sam took some great pictures.'

Do I need a visual reminder of the beautiful Grayson I do not want you to marry?

'Sure,' I marvel at a smile on my face and walk over to the laptop. And there he is, looking at me in black and white, looking at me and finding me missing.

I pretend to read the article, meeting his gray, staring gaze all the time, searching the photo for a clue as to why he is not the man for me - his own words for me. And it is suddenly, blindingly obvious. He is too beautiful. We are the opposite of two hugely different worlds. I have a vision of myself as Icarus flying too close to the sun and crashing and burning as a result. His words make sense. He is not the man for me.

That is what he meant, and it makes his rejection easier to accept... almost. I can live with it. I understand.

'Alright Murray,' I do. 'I will study.' I am not going to think about him for now, I swear to myself, and opening my review notes, I start reading.

It is only when I am in bed, trying to sleep, that I let my thoughts drift into my strange morning. I keep coming back to the quote `` I don't do the girlfriend thing,' and I'm angry that I didn't jump on that information sooner, while I was hugging him mentally begging him of all the fibers of my being. kiss Me. He had said it on the spot. He did not want me as a girlfriend. I turn to my side. Lazily, I wonder if he might be single, I close my eyes and start to drift. He runs away. Well not for you, my sleeping

subconscious has one last blow on me before lashing out on my dreams.

-And-

That night I dream of gray eyes, leafy patterns in the milk, and I run in dark places with weird strip lighting, and I do not know if I am running to something or if I am moving away... not clear.

I put my pen down. Finished. My final exam is over. The Cheshire Cat's smile spread across my face. This is the first time this week that I smile. It is Friday, and we are going to celebrate tonight, really celebrate. I might even get drunk! I have never been drunk before. I look at Murray across the gym, and she is still scribbling furiously, five minutes before the end. This is the end of my university career. I will never have to sit in rows of anxious and isolated students again. Inside, I make Billie full cartwheels around my head, knowing full well that this is the only place I can make Billie full cartwheels. Maury stops writing and puts down his pen. She looks at me and I catch her Cheshire cat smile as well.

We return together to our apartment in his Mercedes, refusing to discuss our last article. Maury is more concerned with what she is going to wear at

the bar tonight. I am actively looking for my keys in my purse.

'Naddalin, there is a package for you.' Maury stands on the steps to the front door and holds a brown paper package. Odd. I have not ordered anything from Amazon recently.

Maury gives me the package and takes my keys to open the front door. It is addressed to Miss Naddalin Black. There is no sender’s address or name. It is my mom or Ray.

'It's probably from my parents.'

'Open it!' Maury is excited as she heads to the kitchen for our 'exams are over hurray Champagne'.

I open the package and find inside a half-leather box containing three old books covered with identical fabric in new condition and a plain white card. On one side, in black ink with neat cursive writing, it is:

I recognize the quote from Tess. I am stunned by the irony as I just spent three hours writing about Thomas Hardy's novels on my final exam. There is no irony... it is on purpose. I thoroughly inspect the books, three volumes of Tess des D'Urbervilles. I open the front cover.

Written in an old typeface on the faceplate is:

'London: Jack R. Osgood, McIlvaine and Co, 1891.'

Holy shit - these are the first editions. They must be worth a fortune, and I immediately know who sent them. Maury is on my shoulder looking at the books. She takes the card.

'First editions,' I whisper.

'No.' Maury's eyes are wide in disbelief. 'Maury?

I agree.

'I can't think of anyone else.'

'What does this card mean?'

'I have no idea. That is a warning - honestly, it keeps warning me. I do not know why. It is not like I am banging on his door. I frown.

'I know you don't want to talk about him, Naddalin, but he seriously loves you.' Warnings or not.

I did not let myself dwell on Grayson Murray last week. Okay... so his gray eyes still haunt my dreams, and I know it will take forever to erase the feel of his arms around me and his wonderful scent from my brain. Why did he send me this?

He told me that I was not for him.

'I found a first edition of Tess on sale in New York for $ 14,000. But yours looks much better. They must have cost more.' Maury consults his good friend Google.

'This quote - Tess told her mother after Alec D'Urberville had his bad way with her.'

'I know,' Maury said. 'What is he trying to say?'

'I don't know, and I don't care. I cannot accept them from him. I'll send them back with an equally puzzling quote from an obscure part of the book.'

'The little where Angel Clare says is going?' Maury asks with a completely straight face.

'Yes, this little.' I laugh. I love Maury, she is so loyal and supportive. I repack the books and leave them on the dining table. Maury hands me a glass of champagne.

'At the end of the exams and our new life in New York,' she smiles.

'Until the end of the exams, our new life in New York and remarkable results.' We drink and drink.

The bar is noisy and bustling, full of graduates soon to come out to be ransacked. Sam joins us. He will not

graduate for another year, but he is in the mood to party and puts us in the spirit of our newfound freedom by buying a pitcher of margaritas for all of us. As I am doing my fifth, I know it is not an innovative idea besides champagne.

'What now, Naddalin?' Sam yells at me because of the noise.

'Maury and I are moving to New York. Maury's parents bought a condo there for her.'

'Dios mio, how the other half lives. But you'll be back for my show.'

'Of course, Sam, I wouldn't miss that for the world.' I smile, and he puts his arm around my waist and pulls me closer.

'It means a lot to me that you're here Naddalin,' he whispers in my ear. 'Another margarita?'

'Sam Lewis Black - are you trying to get me drunk? Because it works.'

I laugh. 'I think I'd better get a beer. I'll get us a pitcher.'

'No more drink, Naddalin!' Maury bellows.

Maury has the constitution of an ox. Her arm is draped over Levi, one of our English comrades and her usual photographer in her student newspaper. He has given up taking pictures of the

drunkenness that surrounds him. He only has eyes for Maury. She is the tiny tank top, skinny jeans, and high heels, hair stacked with tendrils that hang softly around her face, her usual stunning body. Me, I am more of a Converse and t-shirt girl, but I wear my most flattering jeans. I step out of Sam's hold and get up from our table. Whoa. Headpin. I must grab the back of the chair. Tequila cocktails are not a promising idea.

I walk over to the bar and decide I should visit the powder room while I am standing. Happy thinking, Naddalin. I stagger in the crowd. Of course, there is a line, but at least it is calm and cool in the hallway. I take my cell phone to relieve the boredom of waiting in line. Hmm… Who did I call the last time? Was it Sam? Before that, a number that I do not recognize. Oh yes. Maury, that is his number. I laugh. I have no idea what time I am going to wake him up. He can tell me why he sent me these books and the cryptic message. If he wants me to stay away, he should leave me alone. I suppressed a drunken smile and hit automatic redial. He answers on the second ring.

'Naddalin? He is surprised to hear me. Well, frankly, I am surprised to call him.

Then my confused brain registers... how does it know it is me?

'Why did you send me the books?' I insult him.

'Naddalin, you are fine, you look strange. Her voice is full of concern.

'I am not the strange one, you are,' I accuse. There - that told him, my fortitude fueled by alcohol.

'Naddalin, have you been drinking?

'What is this for you?'

'I'm - curious. Where are you?'

'In a bar.'

'What bar? He looks exasperated.

'A bar in Pittsburgh.'

'How do you get home?'

'I'll find a way.' This conversation is not going as I expected.

'Which bar are you in?'

'Why did you send me the books, Grayson?'

'Naddalin, where are you, tell me now.' His tone is so, so dictatorial, his usual control freak. I imagine him as a former film director wearing jodhpurs, an old-fashioned megaphone, and a riding crop. The image makes me laugh aloud.

'You are so... domineering,' I laugh.

'Naddalin, then help me, where the fuck are you?'

Grayson Maury swears to me. I am still laughing. 'I'm in Pittsburgh... I'm far from New York.'

'Where in Pittsburgh?'

'Good night, Grayson.

'Naddalin!

I am hanging up. Ha! Although he had not told me about the books. I frown. Mission not accomplished. I am drunk - my head swims uncomfortably as I drag with the line. Well, the point of the exercise was to get drunk. I have succeeded. It is - not an experiment to repeat. The line has moved and now it is my turn. I look blankly at the poster on the back of the bathroom door which advocates the virtues of safe sex. Holy shit did I just call Grayson Maury the Shit. My phone rings and it makes me jump. I scream in surprise.

'Hi,' I bleat shyly into the phone. I had not counted on it.

'I'm coming to get you,' he said, hanging up. Only Grayson Maury could seem so calm and threatening at the same time.

Holy shit. I pull up my jeans. My heart is beating. Coming to get me Oh no. I

am going to be sick... no... I am fine. Wait. It disturbs my head. I did not tell him where I was. He cannot find me here. Besides, it will take him hours to get here from New York, and we will be long gone. I wash my hands and look at my face in the mirror.

I look red and slightly blurry. Hmm... tequila.

I wait at the bar for what feels like forever for the pitcher of beer and finally return to the table.

'You've been gone for so long.' Maury scolds me. 'Where have you been?'

'I was in line for the bathroom.'

Sam and To Have a heated debate over our local baseball team. Sam stops in his tirade to serve us all the beers, and I take a long sip.

'Maury, I better get out there and get some fresh air.'

'Naddalin, you are so light.'

'I'll be five minutes.

I push my way through the crowd again. I am starting to feel nauseous, my head is spinning uncomfortably, and I am a little unsteady on my feet. More unstable than usual.

Drinking in the cool evening air in the parking lot makes me realize how drunk I am.

My vision has been affected and I see the double of everything, like in old reruns of Tom and Jerry Cartoons. I think I will be sick. Why did I let myself screw up?

'Naddalin,' Sam joined me. 'It's, okay?'

'I just drank a little too much.' I smile weakly at him.

'Me too,' he whispers, and his dark eyes watch me intently. 'Do you need a helping hand?' he asks and walks over, wrapping his arm around me.

'Sam, I'm fine. I have this.' I try to push him away weakly.

'Naddalin, please,' he whispers, and now he is holding me in his arms, pulling me closer.

'Sam, what are you doing?'

'You know I love you Naddalin, please.' He has one hand on my lower back that holds me against him, the other on his chin that rocks my head back. Holy shit... he is going to kiss me. 'No Sam, stop - no.' I am pushing it, but it is a hard wall of muscle, and I cannot move it.

His hand has crept through my hair, and he holds my head in place.

'Please, Naddalin, curry?' A, 'he whispers against my lips. His breath is sweet and smells too sweet - of margarita

and beer. He gently trails kisses down my jaw to the side of my mouth. I feel panicked, drunk, and out of control. The sensation is suffocating.

'Sam, no,' I plead. I do not want that. You are my friend and I think I will throw up. 'The lady said no.' A voice in the dark said softly. Holy shit! Grayson Maury is here. HowSam frees me.

'Maury,' he said laconically. I look at Grayson with concern. He looks at Sam and he is furious. Shit. My stomach goes up and I double, my body cannot take alcohol anymore, and I vomit dramatically on the floor.

'Ugh - Dios mio, Naddalin!' Sam jumps back in disgust. Maury grabs my hair, pulls it out of the firing line, and leads me gently to a raised flower bed at the edge of the parking lot. I note, with deep gratitude, that it is in relative darkness.

'If you're going to throw up again, do it here.' I will hold you. He has one arm around my shoulders - the other holds my hair in a makeshift ponytail along my back, so it is out of my face. I clumsily try to push him away, but I throw up again... and again. Oh shit...

How long will this last? Even when my stomach is empty and nothing is coming

back, horrible dry jerks attack my body. I silently swear I will never drink again. It is too appalling for words. Finally, it stops.

My hands are resting on the brick wall of the flower bed, barely standing up - throwing up profusely is exhausting. Maury takes my hands away and hands me a handkerchief.

Only he would have a monogrammed linen handkerchief, freshly washed. CTG. I did not know you could still buy them. I vaguely wonder what the T represents when I wipe my mouth. I cannot bring myself to look at it. I am overwhelmed with shame, disgusted with myself. I want to be swallowed up by the azaleas in the flower bed and be somewhere other than here. Sam is still hovering over the entrance to the bar, watching us. I moan and put my head in my hands. It must be the worst time of my life. My head is still swimming as I try to remember a worse one - and I can only find Grayson's rejection - and so it is, so many darker shades in terms of humiliation. I risk a glance at him. He looks at me, his face calm, without saying anything. Turning around, I look at Sam who looks quite ashamed and, like me, intimidated by Maury. I stare at him. I have a few choice words for my so-called friend,

which I cannot repeat in front of the CEO of Grayson Murray.

Naddalin, you are kidding, he just saw you throwing yourself around and in the local flora. There is no disguise for your lack of distinguished demeanor. 'I'm going to be wrong... inside,' Sam mumbles, but we both ignore him, and he slips into the building. I am alone with Maury. Double shit. What should I tell him? Sorry for the phone call. 'I'm sorry,' I mumble, staring at the handkerchief that I fret furiously with my fingers. That is so sweet. 'What are you sorry for Naddalin?' Oh shit, he wants his fucking pound of flesh. 'The phone call is mostly, being sick. Oh, the list goes on and on,' I whisper, feeling my skin color. Please can I die now? 'We've all been here, maybe not as dramatically as you are,' he said dryly. 'It's about knowing your limits, Naddalin. I mean, I am all for pushing the limits, but it is beyond the pale. My head is buzzing with excess alcohol and irritation. What does that have to do with him, I did not invite him here. He looks like a middle-aged man scolding me like a stray child. Part of me means that if I want to get drunk every night like this, it is my decision and nothing to do with it - but I am not brave enough.

Not now that I threw up in front of him. Why is he still there? 'No,' I said contritely. 'I've never been drunk before and right now I don't want to be drunk again.' I just do not understand why he is here. I am starting to feel weak. He notices my dizziness and grabs me before I fall and pulls me into his arms, holding me to his chest like a child. 'Come on, I'll take you home,' he whispers. 'I need to tell Maury that. Saint Moses, I am again in his arms. 'My brother can tell him.' 'What?' 'My brother Jack is talking to Miss Smith.' 'Oh?' I do not understand. 'He was with me when you called.' 'At New York? I am confused. 'No, I'm staying at the Heathman.' Yet why? 'How did you find me?'

'I tracked your cell phone Naddalin.' Oh, sure he did. How is it possible? Is this legal Stalker, my subconscious whispers to me through the cloud of tequila still floating in my brain, but somehow, because it is him, I do not mind. 'Do you have a jacket or a handbag?' 'Um… yes, I came with the two. Grayson, please, I must tell Maury that. She's going to be worried.' His mouth presses into a hard line, and he sighs heavily. 'If you have to.' He puts me down and, taking my hand, leads me back to the bar. I feel weak, still

drunk, embarrassed, exhausted, mortified, and at a strange level absolutely off the scale, elated. He shakes my hand - such a confusing array of emotions. I will need at least a week to process them all. It is loud, crowded and the music has started so there is a big crowd on the dance floor. Maury is not at our table and Sam is missing. Tom looks lost and desperate on his own. 'Where's Maury?' I yell at Tom over the noise. My head begins to hammer the bass line of the music in time. 'Dance,' Tomyells, and I can tell he is crazy. He eyed Grayson suspiciously. I struggle in my black jacket and place my little shoulder bag over my head so that it rests on my hip. I am good to go, once I see Maury. 'She's on the dance floor.'

I touch Grayson's arm and lean and scream into his ear, brushing his hair with my nose, smelling his clean, fresh scent. Oh my. All these forbidden and unfamiliar feelings that I tried to deny surface and unleash in my drained body. I blush, and somewhere deep, deep down my muscles contract deliciously. He rolls his eyes at me and takes my hand again and leads me to the bar. He served immediately, without waiting for Mr. Control-Freak Maury. Does everything come to him so easily? I do not

hear what he is ordering. He hands me a very tall glass of ice water. 'Drink,' he shouts his order. The moving lights twist and turn to the beat of the music casting eerie colored lights and shadows all over the bar and patrons. He is alternately green, blue, white, and demonic red.

He looks at me intently. I take a temporary sip. 'All that,' he shouts. He is so bossy. He runs his hand through his unruly hair. He looks frustrated, angry. What is his problem? Apart from a silly drunk girl calling him in the middle of the night then he thinks she needs to be saved. And it turns out that she makes her friend in love. Then seeing her being violently ill at his feet. Oh, Naddalin… are you going to experience this one day? My subconscious figuratively silenced me and stared at me over its half-moon specs. I sway slightly and he puts his hand on my shoulder to steady me. I do as I am told and drink the whole glass. It makes me uncomfortable. Taking the glass from me, he sets it on the bar. I notice through a blur what he is wearing, a loose white linen shirt, cozy jeans, black Converse sneakers, and a dark pinstripe jacket. His shirt is unbuttoned at the top, and I see a pinch of hair in the gap. In my

groggy state of mind, it looks delicious. He takes my hand once more.

Holy cow - he leads me on the dance floor. Shit. I do not dance. He can sense my reluctance, and under the colored lights, I can see his amused and slightly Naddalindonic smile. He holds out his hand to me and I am in his arms again, and he starts to move, taking me with him. Boy, he can dance, and I cannot believe I am taking it to step by step. It is because I am drunk that I can follow. He squeezes me tightly against him, his body against mine... if he were not squeezing me so tight, I am sure I would pass out at his feet. Deep inside me, my mother's oft-recited warning comes to me: Never trust a man who can dance. He takes us through the crowded crowd of dancers across the dance floor, and we are next to Maury and Jack, Grayson's brother. The music echoes, loud and suspicious, outside and inside my head. I gasp.

Maury makes her move. She dances her ass, and she only does that if she loves someone. Like someone. That means there will be three of us for breakfast tomorrow morning. Maury! Grayson leans in and yells in Jack's ear. I cannot hear what he is saying. Jack is tall with broad shoulders, curly blond hair, and

bright, wickedly bright eyes. I cannot tell the color under the pulsating heart of the flashing lights. Jack smiles and grabs Maury in his arms, where she is more than happy to be… Maury! Even in my drunken state, I am shocked. She just met him. She nods at everything Jack says and smiles at me and waves. Grayson propels us off the dance floor in double time. But I never got to talk to him. Is she okay? I can see where things are going for him and her. I need to lecture on safe sex. Deep down inside, I hope she is reading one of the posters on the back of the bathroom doors. My thoughts run through my brain, fighting the feeling of drunkenness and vagueness. It is so hot here, so strong, so colorful - too bright. My head starts to swim, oh no... and I can feel the ground rise to meet my face or that is what I feel. The last thing I hear before I pass out in Grayson Maury's arms is his harsh epithet. 'Shit!'

This is noticeably quiet. The light is stifled. I am comfortable and warm in this bed. Hmm... I open my eyes, and for a moment I am still and serene, enjoying the strange unfamiliar surroundings. I have no idea where I am. The headboard behind me is shaped like a massive sun. It is strangely familiar. The bedroom is large and airy and

lavishly furnished in shades of brown and gold and beige. I have seen it before. Where my confused brain struggles through recent visual memories. Holy shit. I am at the Heathman hotel... in a suite. I stayed in a room like this with Maury. It looks bigger. Oh shit. I am in Grayson Maury's suite. How did I get here?

The fractured memories of the previous night slowly come back to haunt me. The drink, oh no the drink, the phone call, oh no the phone call, the vomiting, oh no the vomiting. Sam then Grayson. Oh no. I curl up inside. I do not remember coming here.

I am wearing my t-shirt, my bra, and my panties. No socks. No jeans. Holy shit.

I look at the bedside table. There is a glass of orange juice and two tablets. Advil.

Control monster that he is, he thinks of everything. I sit down and take the tablets. I do not feel that bad, a lot better than I deserve. Orange juice tastes divine.

It is thirst-quenching and refreshing. Nothing beats freshly squeezed orange juice to revive an arid mouth.

Someone is knocking at the door. My heart leaps in my mouth and I cannot

find my voice. He opens the door anyway and walks in.

Holy shit, he is training. He wears gray jogging pants that hang over his hips and a dark gray sweater like his hair. Grayson Maury's sweat, the notion does strange things to me. I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I feel like I am two, if I close my eyes, I am not there.

'Hello Naddalin. How are you feeling?'

Oh no.

'Better than I deserve,' I mumble.

I am watching him. He places a large shopping bag on a chair and grabs each end of the towel around his neck. He looks at me, dark gray eyes, and as usual, I have no idea what he is thinking. He hides his thoughts and feelings so well.

'How did I get here?' My voice is small, contrite.

He comes and sits on the edge of the bed. He is close enough for me to touch him, for me to smell. Oh my... sweat and shower gel and Grayson, that is an intoxicating cocktail - so much better than a margarita, and now I can speak from experience.

'Once you passed out, I didn't want to risk the leather upholstery of my car to

take you to your apartment.' So, I brought you here, 'he said phlegmatically.

'Did you put me to bed?'

'Yes.' His face is impassive.

'Did I vomit again?' My voice is calmer.

'No.'

'Have you undressed me? I whisper.

'Yes.' He raised an eyebrow as I blushed furiously.

'We didn't,' I whisper, my mouth drying in mortified horror as I cannot answer the question. I look at my hands.

'Naddalin, you were in a coma. Necrophilia is not my thing. I love my sensitive and receptive women, 'he says dryly.

'I am really sorry.'

Her mouth lifts slightly in a wry smile.

'It was a very entertaining evening. Not one that I will forget in a moment.'

Me neither - oh he is laughing at me, you bastard. I did not ask him to come to get me.

Somehow, I was made to feel like the villain of the room.

'You didn't have to end up with me with the James Bond stuff you developed for

the highest bidder,' I told him dryly. He looks at me, surprised, and if I am not mistaken, a little hurt.

'First, the technology to track cell phones is available on the Internet. Second, my company does not invest or manufacture any type of surveillance device, and third, if I had not come to pick you up, you would wake up. in the photographer's bed, and from what I remember, you were not too excited about him pushing his suit on, 'he said acidly.

By pressing his costume! I look up at Grayson, he looks at me, his gray eyes blazing, saddened. I try to bite my lip, but I cannot suppress my laughter.

'What medieval chronicle have you escaped from? I laugh. 'You sound like a courteous knight.'

His mood visibly changes. Her eyes soften and her expression warms, and I see a trace of a smile on her beautifully crafted lips.

'Naddalin, I don't think so. Black knight. His smile is Naddalindonic and he shakes his head. 'Did you eat last night? His tone is accusing. I shake my head. What major transgression have I committed now? His jaw tightens, but his face remains impassive.

'You need to eat. That is why you were so sick. Honestly Naddalin, this is the number one drinking rule. He runs that hand through his hair, and I know it is because he is exasperated.

'Are you going to keep scolding me?'

'That's what I do?'

'I think so.'

'You're lucky I'm just scolding you.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, if you were mine you couldn't sit for a week after the bang you did yesterday.' You did not eat, you got drunk, you put yourself in danger. He closes his eyes, fear etched on his pretty face, and he shivers slightly. When he opens his eyes, he looks at me. 'I hate to think about what could have happened to you.'

I answer him with a scowl. What is his problem? What is it for him? If I was his... well, I am not. But a part of me would like to be. This thought pierces the irritation I feel at his bossy words. I blush at the quirk of my subconscious - she does her happy dance in a bright red hula skirt at the thought of being his.

'I would have been fine. I was with Maury.

'And the photographer? he yells at me.

Hmm... young Sam. I will need to face him at some point.

'Sam just got off the line.' I shrug my shoulders.

'Well, the next time he gets off the line, maybe someone should teach him manners.'

'You're quite the disciplinarian,' I hiss at him.

'Oh, Naddalin, you have no idea.' His eyes narrow, then he smiles nastily. It is disarming. One minute I am confused and angry, the next I am looking at her beautiful smile.

Wow... I am delighted, and that is because her smile is so rare. I completely forget what he is talking about.

'I'm going to take a shower. Unless you want to shower first?' He tilts his head to one side, still smiling. My heart sped up and my elongated marrow neglected to trigger synapses to make me breathe. His smile widens, and he reaches out and runs his thumb over my cheek and my lower lip.

'Breath, Naddalin,' he whispers and stands up. 'Breakfast will be here in fifteen minutes.

You must be starving. 'He walks over to the bathroom and closes the door.

I let out the breath I am holding. Why is he so damn attractive? Right now, I want to go join him in the shower. I have never felt this for anyone. My hormones are raging. My skin tingled where his thumb passed over my face and lower lip.

I want to squirm with needy, painful discomfort. I do not understand this reaction.

Hmm… Desire. It is a desire. This is what it feels like.

I lie down on the soft feather pillows. 'If you were mine.' Oh my - what would I do to be his? He is the only man who ever made my blood flow around my body. Yet he is also antagonistic; it is difficult, complicated, and confusing. One minute he puts me off, the next he sends me fourteen-thousand-dollar books, then he stalks me like a stalker.

And yet, I spent the night in his hotel suite, and I feel safe. Protected. He cares enough to come and save me from a danger that he mistakenly perceives. He is not a dark knight at all, but a white knight in shining and dazzling armor - a classic romantic hero - Sir Gawain or Lancelot.

I rush out of bed in a frantic search for my jeans. He comes out of the bathroom wet and shiny from the shower, still unshaven, with just a towel around his waist, and here I am - all bare legs and an awkward gaping mouth. He is surprised to see me out of bed.

'If you are looking for your jeans, I sent them to the laundry.' His gaze is dark obsidian. 'They were splashed with your vomit.'

'Oh.' I blush scarlet. Why or why does he always catch me on the back foot?

'I sent Stephen to get another pair and some shoes. They're in the bag on the chair.'

Clean clothes. What an unexpected bonus.

'Uh… I'm going to take a shower,' I mumble. 'Thank you.' What else can I say: I grab the bag and rush into the bathroom away from the bewildering proximity of naked Grayson. Michelangelo’s David has nothing on him.

In the bathroom, it is hot and humid from where he showered. I undress and quickly get into the shower, anxious to be under the spray of cleansing water. It cascades over me, and I lift my face into the welcoming torrent. I want Grayson Maury. I

want it. Simple fact. For the first time in my life, I want to go to bed with a man. I want to feel his hands and his mouth on me.

He said he loves his sensitive women. He is no single then. But he did not pass me, unlike Paul or Sam. I do not understand. Does he want me? He would not kiss me last week. Am I repulsive against him? And yet, I am here, and he brought me here. I just do not know what his game is. What is he thinking? You slept in his bed all night, and he did not touch you Naddalin. You do the math. My subconscious raised its ugly, sarcastic head. I do not know.

The water is warm and soothing. Hmm... I could stay in that shower, in her bathroom, forever. I grab the shower gel and it smells good. It is a delicious smell. I rub it all over myself, fantasizing that it is him - rubbing that heavenly scented soap into my body, on my breasts, on my stomach, between my thighs with his long fingers. Oh my. My heart rate is speeding up again, it is so... so good.

'Breakfast is here.' He knocks on the door, surprising me.

'All right,' I stutter, pulling myself cruelly out of my erotic reverie.

I get out of the shower and grab two towels. I put my hair in one and wrap it in Carmen Miranda style over my head. Hastily, I dry myself off, ignoring the pleasant feel of the towel rubbing against my over-sensitized skin.

I inspect the bag of jeans. Not only did Stephen bring me jeans and new Converse, but a pale blue shirt, socks, and underwear. Oh my. A clean bra and panties describing them in such a mundane and utilitarian way do not do them justice. They are an exquisite design of fancy European lingerie. All in lace and pale blue adornments. Wow. I am amazed and slightly intimidated by this underwear… In addition, they integrate perfectly. But of course, they do. I blush to think of the Buzz-Cut man in a lingerie store buying it for me. I wonder what else is in his job description.

I dress quickly. The rest of the clothes are perfectly adjusted. I abruptly dry my hair with a towel and desperately try to control it. But, as usual, he refuses to cooperate, and my only option is to hold him back with a tie. I will search for my purse when I find it. I take a deep breath. It is time to face Mr. Confusing.

I am relieved to find the room empty. I instantly search for my purse - but

it is not there. Taking another deep breath, I walk into the living room of the suite. It is enormous. There is a plush and plush sitting area, all plush sofas and plush cushions, an elaborate coffee table with a stack of shiny large books, a desk area with a high-end Mac, a huge plasma TV on the wall, and Grayson is sitting at a dining table across the room reading a newspaper. It is the size of a tennis court or something, not that I play tennis, although I have looked at Maury a few times. Maury!

'Shit, Maury,' I croak. Grayson looks at me.

'She knows you're here and still alive.' I texted Jack, 'he said with just a hint of humor.

Oh no. I remember his fervent dance the night before. All his patented movements were used with maximum effect to seduce Grayson's brother no less! What will she think of my presence here? I have never been outside before. She is still with Jack. She has only done it twice before, and both times I had to endure the hideous pink pajamas for a week because of the fallout. She will think I had a one-night stand too.

Grayson looks at me imperiously. He wears a white linen shirt; the collar and cuffs are undone.

'Sit down,' he orders, gesturing to a seat at the table. I cross the room and sit across from him as asked. The table is loaded with food.

'Didn't know what you liked, so I ordered a selection from the breakfast menu.' He gives me a crooked and apologetic smile.

'It's very disgusting of you,' I whisper, baffled by the choice, even though I am hungry. 'Yes, it is.' He looks guilty.

I go for the pancakes, maple syrup, scrambled eggs, and bacon. Grayson tries to hide a smile as he returns to his egg white omelet. The food is delicious.

'Tea?' he asks.

'Yes please.'

He hands me a small teapot of hot water and on the saucer is a bag of Twinings English Breakfast tea. Hell, he remembers how much I love my tea.

'Your hair is very damp,' he growls.

'I couldn't find the hairdryer,' I mumbled, embarrassed. Not that I watched. The mouth of

Grayson presses himself into a hard line, but he says nothing.

'Thanks for organizing the clothes.'

'It's a pleasure, Naddalin. This color looks good on you.

I blush and look at my fingers.

'You know, you really should learn to take a compliment.' His tone is castigated.

'I should give you some money for these clothes.'

He looks at me like I offended him on some level. I hurry.

'You already gave me the books, which of course I cannot accept. But these clothes, please let me pay you back.' I smile shyly at him.

'Naddalin, trust me, I can afford it.'

'That's not the point. Why should you buy them for me?'

'Because I can,' his eyes shine with a wicked glow.

'Just because you can doesn't mean you should,' I replied calmly as he arched an eyebrow at me, his eyes sparkling, and suddenly I feel like we are talking about something else, but I do not. I do not know what it is. Which reminds me...

'Why did you send me the books, Grayson?' My voice is soft. He puts his cutlery down and looks at me intently, his gray eyes burning with unfathomable emotion.

Holy shit - my dry mouth.

'Well, when you almost got run over by the rider - and I was holding you and you were looking at me - all of them kiss me, kiss me, Grayson,' he stops and shrugs slightly. 'I owed you an apology and a warning.' He runs his hand through his hair. 'Naddalin, I am not a man of heart and flowers, I do not have romance. My tastes are incredibly unique.

You should get away from me. He closes his eyes as if he were defeated. 'There is something about you, however, and I find it impossible to stay away. But I think you've figured it out already.'

My appetite is gone. He cannot stay away!

'So no,' I whisper.

He gasps, his eyes wide.

'You don't know what you are saying.'

'Enlighten me, then.

We are sitting looking at each other, none of us touching our food.

'Aren't you single then?' I breathe.

Amusement lights up his gray eyes.

'No, Naddalin, I'm not single.' He stops for this information to penetrate, and I blush scarlet. The mouth-to-brain filter is broken again. I cannot believe I just said it

aloud. 'What are your plans for the next few days?' he asks, his voice low.

'I work today, starting at noon. What time is it?' I suddenly panic.

'It's just after ten o'clock, you have plenty of time. What about tomorrow?' His elbows are on the table and his chin rests on his long, pointed fingers.

'Maury and I are going to start packing. We're moving to New York next weekend, and I've been working at Eastwood all this week.'

'Do you already have a place in New York?'

'Yes.'

'Or?'

'I don't remember the address. It's in the pike market area.'

'Not far from me,' his lips twitched into a half-smile. 'So, what are you going to do to work in New York?'

Where is he going with all these questions? The Grayson Murray Inquisition is as irritating as the Murray Smith Inquisition. 'I applied for internships. I'm waiting to hear.' 'Did you apply to my company as I suggested?' I rinse... of course not. 'Um no.' 'And what's wrong with my business?' 'Your business or your business?' I smile. He smiles slightly. 'Are you smiling

at me, Miss Black?' He tilts his head to one side, and he looks amused, but it is hard to tell. I blush and glance at my unfinished breakfast. I cannot look him in the eye when he uses that tone of voice. 'I'd like to bite that lip,' he whispers darkly. Oh my. I have no idea that I am chewing my lower lip. My mouth opens as I gasp and swallow at the same time. This must be the sexiest thing anyone has ever told me. My heart is pounding, and I am panting. Jeez, I am a shuddering, wet mess, and he has not even touched me. I squirm in my seat and meet his dark gaze. 'Why not you? I dispute quietly. 'Because I'm not going to touch you Naddalin - not until I have your written consent to do so.' His lips suggest a smile. What? 'What does it mean?'

'Exactly what I'm saying.' He sighs and shakes his head at me, amused, but also exasperated. 'I need to show you, Naddalin. What time do you finish working tonight?' 'About eight.' 'Well, we could go to New York tonight or next Saturday for dinner at my place, and then I'll give you the facts. The choice is yours.' 'Why can't you tell me now?' I look petulant. 'Because I enjoy my breakfast and your company.' Once you are enlightened, you will not want to see me again. Holy shit. What does it

mean? Is the white slave of little children in a part of the planet forsaken by God? Is he part of an underworld crime syndicate? That would explain why he is so rich. Is he deeply religious? Is he helpless? Surely not, he could prove it to me now. Oh my. I blush scarlet thinking of the possibilities. This is getting me nowhere. I would like to solve the Grayson Maury riddle as soon as possible. If that means that the secret, he has is so gross that I do not want to know it anymore then, frankly, that will be a relief. Do not lie to yourself - my subconscious is screaming at me - it is going to have to be terrible to make you run for the hills. 'Tonight.' He raises an eyebrow. 'Like Eve, you eat so fast from the tree of knowledge,' he smiles. 'Are you smiling at me, Mr. Maury?' I ask nicely. Pompous ass. He narrows his eyes at me and picks up his BlackBerry. He presses a number.

'Stephen. I'm going to need Fake and Gay.' Fake and Gay! Who is he? 'From Pittsburgh, let us say eight-thirty... No, wait at Escala... all night.' All night long! 'Yes. On-call tomorrow morning. I'll be driving from Pittsburgh to New York.' Pilot? 'Emergency pilot from ten-thirty.' He puts the phone down. No please or thank you. 'Do people always do what you tell them?'

'Usually, if they want to keep their job,' he said unmoved. 'What if they don't work for you?' 'Oh, I can be very persuasive, Naddalin. You should finish your breakfast. And then I will drop you home. I will pick you up from Eastwood's at eight when you are done. We will fly to New York. ' I blink quickly at him. 'Fly?' 'Yes. I have a helicopter.' I am speechless. I have my second date with Grayson, oh-so-mysterious Maury. From coffee to helicopter rides. Wow. 'Shall we go by helicopter to New York?' 'Yes.' 'Why?' He smiles nastily. 'Because I can. Finish your breakfast.' How can I eat now? I am going to New York by helicopter with Grayson Maury. And he wants to bite my lip… I squirm at the thought 'Eat,' he said more sharply. 'Naddalin, I have a problem with wasted food... eat.' 'I can't eat all of this.' I am speechless at what is left on the table. 'Eat what's on your plate. If you had eaten properly yesterday, you would not be here, and I would not declare my hand so soon. Her mouth is drawn into a sinister line. He looks angry. I frown and return to my now cold food. I am too excited to eat, Grayson. You do not understand?

My subconscious explains. But I am too cowardly to express these thoughts

aloud, especially when he looks so brooding. Hmm, like a little boy. This thought was funny. 'What's so funny?' he asks. I shake my head, not daring to tell him and keep my eyes on my food. As I swallow my last piece of pancake, I watch it. He looks at me speculatively. 'Good girl,' he said. 'I'll take you home when you dry your hair. I don't want you to get sick.' There is some unspoken promise in his words. What does he mean? I leave the table, wondering for a moment if I should ask permission but rejecting the idea. It sounds like a dangerous precedent to be set. I go back to his room. A thought stops me. 'Where did you sleep last night?' I turn to look at him still sitting in the dining room chair. I do not see any blankets or sheets here - he had them put away. 'In my bed,' he said simply, his gaze unmoved again. 'Oh.' 'Yes, that was also new to me.' He smiles. 'Not having... sex.' There - I said the word. I blush - of course. 'No,' he shakes his head and frowns as if remembering something uncomfortable. 'Sleep with someone.' He picks up his newspaper and continues reading. What does this mean in the name of heaven? Has he never slept with anyone? I look at him in disbelief. She is the most mystifying person I have ever

met. And it occurs to me that I slept with Grayson Maury, and I kicked myself - what would I have given to be aware of watching him sleep. See him vulnerable. Somehow, I find it hard to imagine this.

Well, allegedly all will be revealed tonight. In his room, I rummage in a chest of drawers and find the hairdryer. With my fingers, I dry my hair as best I can. When I'm done, I head for the bathroom. I want to clean my teeth. I look at Grayson's toothbrush. It would be like having it in my mouth. Hmm... Glancing guiltily over my shoulder at the door, I feel the bristles on the toothbrush. They are wet. He must have used it before. Grabbing it quickly, I throw toothpaste on it and brush my teeth in a quick double time. I feel so mean. It's such a thrill.

Grabbing my t-shirt, bra, and panties from yesterday, I put them in the bag Stephen had and directed them to the living area on the hunt for my bag and jacket. Deep joy, there is a tie in my bag. Grayson watches me as I pull my hair back into a ponytail, his expression unreadable. I feel his eyes follow me as I sit down and wait for him to finish. He's on his BlackBerry talking to someone. 'They want

two?... How much will it cost?... Okay, and what security measures do we have in place?

...And they'll go through Suez?... How safe is Ben Sudan?... And when do they get to Darfur?... Okay, let's go. Keep me posted on progress. 'He hangs up. 'Ready to go?' I agree. I wonder what his conversation was about. He puts on a navy striped jacket, picks up his car keys, and heads for the door. 'After you, Miss Black,' he whispers as he opens the door for me. He looks so casually elegant. I stop, a little too long, drinking at his sight. And to think that I slept with him last night and, after all the tequila and the vomit, he's still here. Besides, he wants to take me to New York. Why me, I do not understand? I walk towards the door remembering his words - There is something about you - Well, the feeling is entirely mutual, Mr. Maury, and I'm trying to find out what it is. We walk silently down the hall to the elevator. While we wait, I look at him through my lashes, and he looks at me out of the corner of my eyes. I smile and his lips quiver. The elevator arrives and we enter.

We are alone. Suddenly, for some inexplicable reason, perhaps our proximity

in such an enclosed space, the atmosphere between us changes, charging with electric and uplifting anticipation. My breathing changes as my heart pounders. His head turns slightly towards me, his eyes darker. I bite my lip. 'Oh, fuck the paperwork,' he growls. He throws himself at me, pushing me against the elevator wall. Before I know it, he has both of my hands in one of his in a vise-like grip above my head, and he's pinning me to the wall using his hips. Holy shit. Her other hand grabs my ponytail and pulls down, bringing my face up, and her lips are on mine. It just isn't painful. I moaned into her mouth, opening her tongue. He takes full advantage, his tongue exploring my mouth expertly. I've never been kissed like this. My tongue timidly strokes hers and joins hers in a slow erotic dance that's all about touch and feel, all bump and squeak. He raises his hand to grab my chin and holds me in place. I am helpless, my hands pinned, my face held and her hips holding me back. I feel his erection against my stomach.

Oh my... He wants me. Grayson Maury, the Greek god, wants me, and I want him, here... now, in the elevator. 'You. Are. So. Sweet,' he mutters, every word choppy. The elevator stops, the doors open

and he walks away from me in the blink of an eye, leaving me hanging. Three men in business suits look at us both and smile at us as they get on board. My heartbeat is through the roof, I feel like I have run an uphill race. I want to bend down and grab my knees... but it's too obvious. I am watching him. He looks so cool and calm like he's doing the New York Times crossword. How unfair. Is he insensitive to my presence? He looks at me out of the corner of his eye, and he gently breathes a deep breath. Oh, he's very well affected - and my tiny inner goddess swings in a sweet victorious samba. Businessmen come out to the second floor. We still have a floor to go. 'You brushed your teeth,' he said, looking at me. 'I used your toothbrush,' I breathe. His lips curl up in a half-smile. 'Oh, Naddalin Black, what am I going to do with you?' The doors open on the first floor, and he takes my hand and pulls me away. 'What is it for the elevators?' he mumbles, more to himself than to me as he crosses the hall. I had a hard time keeping up with him because my minds were completely, royally, scattered all over the floor and walls of elevator three at the Heathman Hotel.

Grayson opens the passenger door on the black Audi SUV, and I climb into it.

It's a beast of a car. He didn't mention the explosion of passion that exploded in the elevator. Should we talk about it or pretend it didn't happen? It hardly seems real, my first flawless kiss. Over time, I give it the status of mythical, Arthurian legend, Lost City of Atlantis. It never happened, it never existed. Maybe I imagined everything. No, I touch my lips, swollen from his kiss. It happened. I am a changed woman. I want this man, desperately, and he wanted me.

I am watching him. Grayson is his usual self, polite and slightly aloof.

How confusing.

He starts the engine and reverses out of his place in the parking lot. He turns on the MP3 player. The interior of the car is filled with the sweetest and most magical music of two singing women. Oh wow... all my senses are in diNaddalinray, so it's doubly affecting. It sends delicious chills up my spine. Grayson steps out onto SW Park Avenue, and he drives with easy, lazy confidence.

'What are we listening to?'

'This is Delibes' flower duet from the opera Lakme. Do you like that?'

'Grayson, that's wonderful.

'It's true, isn't it?' he smiles looking at me. And for a moment, it looks her age; young, carefree, and breathtakingly beautiful. Is this the key for him? Music, I sit and listen to the angelic voices, teasing and seducing me.

'Can I hear it again?'

'Of course.' Grayson pushes a button and the music hits me once more. It's a gentle, slow, gentle, and sure assault on my auditory senses.

'Do you like classical music?' I ask, hoping to get a rare glimpse of her personal preferences.

'My taste is eclectic, Naddalin, everything from Thomas Tallis to the Kings of Leon.

It depends on my mood. You?'

'Me too. Although I don't know who Thomas Tallis is.'

He turns and looks at me briefly before his eyes return to the road.

'I'll play it for you someday. He's a 16th century British composer. Tudor,

church choral music.' Grayson smiles at me. 'It sounds very esoteric, I know, but it's also magical, Naddalin.'

He presses a button and the Kings of Leon begin to sing. Hmm... that's what I know. Sex on fire. How appropriate. The music is interrupted by the sound of a cell phone ringing on the MP3 speakers. Grayson pushes a button on the steering wheel.

'Maury,' he snaps. He's so blunt.

'Mr. Maury, it's Welch here. I have the information you need.' A hoarse, disembodied voice comes from the speakers.

'Good. Email it to me. anything to add?'

'No sir.'

He presses the button, then the call ends, and the music returns. No goodbye or thank you. I'm so happy that I never seriously considered working for him. I shudder at the very idea. He's just too controlling and cold with his employees. The music cuts off again for the phone.

'Maury.'

'The NDA has been emailed to you, Mr. Maury.' A woman's voice.

'Good. That's it, Andrea.'

'Have a nice day sir.'

Grayson hangs up with the push of a button on the steering wheel. The music is turned on very briefly when the phone rings again. Damn, is this his life, nagging phone calls?

'Maury,' he snaps.

'Hi, Grayson, are you flying?'

'Hello, Jack - I'm on speakerphone and I'm not alone in the car,' Grayson sighs.

'Who is with you?'

Grayson rolls his eyes.

'Naddalin Black'.

'Hi Naddalin!'

Naddalin!

'Hello Jack.'

'I've heard a lot about you,' Jack whispers huskily. Grayson frowns.

'Don't believe a word from Maury.'

Jack laughs.

'I'm dropping off Naddalin now.' Grayson emphasizes my name. 'Should I come and get you?' 'Of course.'

'See you soon.' Grayson hangs up and the music is back.

'Why do you insist on calling me Naddalin?'

'Because it's your name.'

'I prefer Naddalin.'

'Do you know?' he whispers.

We are almost at my apartment. It didn't take long.

'Naddalin,' he said to himself. I frown at him, but he ignores my expression. 'What happened in the elevator - it's not going to happen again, well, unless it's premeditated.'

He stops in front of my duplex. I realize belatedly that he hasn't asked me where I live - yet he does. But then he sent the books, of course, he knows where I live.

What capable cell phone tracking, helicopter possession, stalker wouldn't do.

Why doesn't he kiss me again? I do not understand. Honestly, his last name should be Cryptic, not Maury. He gets out of the car, walking with easy, long-legged Billie around me to open the door, always sir - except perhaps in rare and precious moments in the elevators. I blush at the memory of his mouth on mine, and the thought that I had been unable to touch him comes to my mind. I wanted to run my fingers through his decadent, messy hair, but I had been unable to move my hands. I am frustrated in retrospect.

'I liked what happened in the elevator,' I whispered as I got out of the car. I'm not sure if I hear an audible gasp, but I choose to ignore it and walk up the steps to the front door.

Maury and Jack are seated at our dining table. The fourteen thousand dollar books are gone. Thank God. I have plans for them. She has Maury's most ridiculous smile on her face, and she looks tangled up in a sexy way. Grayson follows me into the living room, and despite his smile, I've had a good time all night, Maury looks at him warily.

'Hi Naddalin.' She jumps up to hug me, then holds me at arm's length to examine me. She frowns and turns to Grayson.

'Hello, Grayson,' she says, and her tone is a little hostile.

'Miss Smith,' he said in his stiff, formal manner.

'Grayson, his name is Maury,' Jack mutters.

'Maury. Grayson gives him a polite nod and looks at Jack who is smiling and also stands up to hug me.

'Hi, Naddalin,' he smiles, his blue eyes twinkling, and I love him immediately. He has nothing like Grayson, but then they are foster brothers.

'Hi, Jack,' I smile at him, and I'm aware that I'm biting my lip.

'Jack, we better go. Grayson said softly.

'Sure.' He turns to Maury and hugs her and gives her a long, prolonged kiss.

Damn... get a room. I look at my feet, embarrassed. I look at Grayson and he

looks at me intently. I squint at him. Why can't you kiss me like this? Jack continues to kiss Maury, sweeping her off her feet and plunging her into a dramatic grip so her hair touches the floor as he kisses her hard.

'See yeah, baby,' he smiles.

Maury just melts. I've never seen her melt before - the words friendly and submissive come to mind. Alright Maury, boy, Jack must be good. Grayson rolls his eyes and looks at me, his expression unreadable, though perhaps slightly amused. He tidies a stray section of my hair that came loose from my ponytail behind my ear. My breathing stops at the touch, and I tilt my head lightly against his fingers. His eyes soften and he runs his thumb over my lower lip. My blood is burning in my veins. And too quickly, his touch disappeared.

'See yeah, baby,' he whispers, and I have to laugh because that doesn't sound like him at all. But even though I know he is irreverent, affection draws me deeply.

'I'll pick you up at eight o'clock.' He turns to leave, opens the front door, and walks out onto the porch. Jack follows him to the car but turns and sends Maury

another kiss, and I feel an unwanted pain of jealousy.

'So, have you? Maury asks as we watch them get into the car and leave, searing curiosity evident in his voice.

'No,' I crack in irritation, hoping that will stop the questions. We return to the apartment. 'You obviously did, though.' I can't contain my urge. Maury always that I get him, trapped men. She is irresistible, beautiful, sexy, funny, above all... everything that I am not. But her smile in response is contagious.

'And I see him again tonight.' She claps her hands and jumps up and down like a little child. She can't contain her excitement and happiness, and I can't help but feel happy for her. A happy Maury... this is going to be interesting.

'Grayson is taking me to New York tonight.'

' New York?

'Yes.'

'Maybe you will then?'

'Oh, I hope so.'

'Do you like him then?'

'Yes.'

'Like him enough to...?'

'Yes.'

She raises her eyebrows.

'Wow. Naddalin Black, finally fell in love with a man, and it's Grayson Maury - hot sexy billionaire.'

'Oh yeah - it's all about the money.' I smile, and we both burst into a giggle.

'Is this a new blouse?' she asks, and I left her all the irrelevant details about my night.

'Has he kissed you yet?' she asks as she prepares the coffee.

I'm blushing.

'Once.'

'Once!' she's laughing about it.

I nod, rather ashamed of the face.

'He is very reserved.

She frowns.

'It's strange.'

'I don't think weird really covers this,' I whisper.

'We have to make sure that you are just irresistible for tonight,' she said with determination.

Oh no... it seems to take time, to be humiliating and painful.

'I have to be at work in an hour.'

'I can work within that time frame. Come on.' Maury grabs my hand and leads me to his room.

The day drags on at Eastwood's even though we're busy. We have reached the summer season, so I have to spend two hours restocking the shelves after the store is closed. It's crazy to work and it leaves me too much time to think. I haven't had much luck all day.

Under Maury's tireless and downright intrusive instructions, my legs and armpits are shaved to perfection, my eyebrows plucked, and I'm polished all over. It was a most unpleasant experience.

But she assures me that's what men expect these days. What else will he expect? I have to convince Maury that's what I want to do. For some strange reason, she doesn't trust him, possibly because he's so rigid and formal. She says she can't put her finger on it, but I promised to text her when I got to New York. I didn't tell her about the helicopter, she would be freaking out.

I also have the same problem. He left three messages and seven missed calls on my cell phone.

He is also called home twice. Maury was very vague as to where I am. He'll know she's got me covered. Maury is not doing anything vague. But I decided to let it simmer. I'm still too angry with him.

Grayson mentioned some sort of written paperwork, and I'm not sure if he was kidding or if I'm going to have to sign something. It's so frustrating to try to guess. And on top of any angst, I can barely contain my excitement or my nerves. Tonight is evening!

After all, this time, am I ready for this? My inner goddess looks at me, patting her little foot impatiently. She's been up for this for years, and she's up for anything

with Grayson Maury, but I still don't understand what he sees in me... mousey Naddalin Black - it just doesn't make sense.

He's on time, of course, and is waiting for me when I leave Eastwood. He steps out of the back of the Audi to open the door and gives me a warm smile.

'Good evening, Miss Black,' he said.

'Mr. Maury. I nod politely at him as I get into the backseat of the car. Stephen is seated in the driver's seat.

'Hello, Stephen,' I said.

'Good evening, Miss Black,' her voice is polite and professional. Grayson climbs over to the other side and squeezes my hand, giving it a slight squeeze that I feel all over my body.

'How was the job?' he asks.

'Very long,' I replied, and my voice was hoarse, too low, and full of need.

'Yeah, it's been a long day for me too.' His tone is serious.

'What did you do?' I do it.

'I went hiking with Jack.' His thumb strokes my joints, back and forth, and my heart skips a beat as my breathing quickens. How does he do this to me? It only affects a very small area of my body and hormones fly away.

The trip to the helipad is short and, before I know it, we are arriving. I wonder where the legendary helicopter is. We are in a built-up area of the city and even I know that helicopters need space to take off and land. Stephen parks get out and open the door of my car. Grayson is beside me in an instant and takes my hand back.

'Ready?' he asks. I nod and want to say anything, but I can't articulate the words because I'm too nervous, too excited.

'Stephen'. He nods to his driver and we head into the building, straight to a set of elevators. Elevator! The memory of our kiss this morning comes back to haunt me.

I haven't thought of anything else all day. Reverie at Eastwood's cash register. Twice Mr. Eastwood had to shout my name to bring me back to Earth. To say I was distracted would be the understatement of the year. Grayson looks at me, a slight

smile on his lips. Ha! He also thinks about it.

'It's only three stories,' he said dryly, his gray eyes dancing in amusement. He must be telepathic. It's scary.

I try to keep my face straight as I enter the elevator. The doors close, and there it is, the strange electric pull crackling between us, enslaving me. I close my eyes in a vain attempt to ignore him. He tightens his grip on my hand, and five seconds later the doors open onto the roof of the building. There you go, a white helicopter with the name Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. written in blue with the company logo on the side. It is certainly a misuse of company property.

He takes me to a small office where an old-timer sits behind the desk.

'Here's your flight plan, Mr. Maury. All external verifications are carried out. He is ready and waiting for you sir. You are free to go.

'Thanks, Joe.' Grayson smiled warmly at him.

Oh. Someone who deserves Grayson's polite treatment, maybe he's not

an employee. I look at the old man with admiration.

'Let's go,' Grayson says, and we head for the helicopter. When you're up close, it's a lot bigger than I thought. I expected this to be a roadster version for two, but it has at least seven seats. Grayson opens the door and walks me over to one of the seat upfronts.

'Sit down - don't touch anything,' he orders, climbing up behind me.

He closes the door slamming. I'm glad the area is lit, otherwise, I would have a hard time seeing inside the small cockpit. I sit in my assigned seat and he crouches down next to me to secure me to the harness. It is a four-point harness with all the straps connected to a central buckle. He tightens the two top straps so I can barely move.

He is so close and attentive to what he is doing. If I could only lean forward, my nose would be in her hair. It smells, clean, cool, heavenly, but I am firmly attached to my seat and effectively still. He looks up and smiles as if enjoying his usual private joke, his gray eyes warm. He is so close. I

hold my breath as he pulls on one of the top straps.

'You are safe, no escape,' he whispers, his eyes burning. 'Breathe, Naddalin,' he adds softly. Reaching out, he strokes my cheek, running his long fingers up to my chin, which he grasps between his thumb and forefinger. He leans forward and plants a brief, chaste kiss on my lips, leaving me tottering, my insides tightening at the exciting and unexpected touch of his lips.

'I like this harness,' he whispers.

What?

He sits down next to me and curls up in his seat, then begins a lengthy process of checking gauges and flipping switches and knobs to the bewildering array of dials, lights, and switches in front of me. Small lights blink and blink from various dials, and the entire dashboard lights up.

'Put on your cans,' he said, pointing to a helmet in front of me. I push them in and the rotor blades start. They are deafening. He puts on his headphones and continues to flip various switches.

'I'm just going through all the pre-flight checks.' Grayson's disembodied voice is in my ears through the headphones. I turn around and smile at him.

'Do you know what you are doing?' I ask. He turns around and smiles at me.

'I have been a fully qualified pilot for four years, Naddalin, you are safe with me.' He gives me a wolf smile. 'Well, while we fly,' he adds, winking at me.

Flashing... Grayson!

'Are you ready?'

I nod with wide eyes.

'Okay, turn. PDX is Fake and Gay Golf - Golf Echo Hotel, cleared for take-off.

Please confirm, done. '

'Fake and Gay - you're clear. PDX to call, go to four thousand, heading for zero one zero, finished.'

The Roger tower, Fake and Gay set, over and over again. The helicopter climbs slowly and smoothly into the air.

Pittsburgh disappears before us as we head into US airspace, although my

stomach remains firmly in Oregon. Whoa! All the bright lights shrink until they gently twinkle beneath us. It's like looking from the inside of a fishbowl. Once we are higher there is nothing to see. It's dark, not even the moon to light up our trip. How can he see where we are going?

'Eerie is not it?' Grayson's voice is in my ears.

'How do you know you are going the right way?'

'Here.' He points his long index finger at one of the gauges, and he points to an electronic compass. 'This is a Eurocopter EC135. One of the safest in its class. It is equipped for night flight.' He looks at me and smiles at me.

'There's a helipad above the building I live in. That's where we're heading.'

Of course, there is a helipad where he lives. I'm so out of my league here. His face is softly lit by the dashboard lights. He concentrates hard and continually looks at the different dials in front of him. I drink his features under my eyelashes. He has a beautiful profile. Straight nose, square jaw -

I'd like to run my tongue along his jaw. He hasn't shaved, and his stubble makes the prospect doubly tempting. Hmm… I'd like to feel how rough it is under my tongue, my fingers, against my face.

'When you fly at night, you fly blind. You have to trust the instrumentation, 'he interrupts my erotic reverie.

'How long will the flight take?' I do it out of breath. I wasn't thinking about sex at all, no, not at all.

'Less than an hour, the wind is in our favor.'

Hmm, less than an hour from New York... not bad, no wonder we're taking the plane.

I have less than an hour before the big reveal. All the muscles tighten deep in my stomach.

I have a serious case of butterflies. They are blooming in my stomach. What the fuck is he in store for me?

'Are you okay, Naddalin?'

'Yes.' My answer is short, cut, squeezed through my nerves.

I think he's smiling, but it's hard to tell in the dark. Grayson flips yet another switch.

'PDX is Fake and Gay now at four thousand plus.' It exchanges information with air traffic control. It all sounds very professional to me. I think we're moving from Pittsburgh airspace to New York International Airport.

'Got Sea-Tac, standing up and down.'

'Look over there.' It shows a small point of light in the distance. 'This is New York.'

'Do you always impress women that way, come fly in my helicopter?' I ask, really interested.

'I've never bought a girl here, Naddalin. It's another first for me.' Her voice is calm, serious.

Oh, that was an unexpected response. Another first: Oh the sleeping stuff, maybe?

'Are you impressed?

'I am impressed, Grayson.

He smiles.

'Awed?' And for a brief moment, he's his age again.

I agree.

'You are so... competent.'

'Thanks, Miss Black,' he said politely. I think he's happy, but I'm not sure.

We drive through the night in silence for a while. New York's bright spot is slowly expanding.

'Sea-Tac tour to Fake and Gay. Flight plan for Escala in place. Please continue. And wait. Done.'

'It's Fake and Gay, understand Sea-Tac. Stand up, over and over again.'

'You obviously enjoy it,' I whisper.

'What?' He looks at me. He looks puzzled in the dim light of the instruments.

'Fly', I answer.

'It takes control and focus... how could I not love it when my favorite is in full swing.'

'Flight?'

'Yes. Glide towards the layman. Gliders and helicopters - I fly them both.'

'Oh.' Expensive hobby. I remember him telling me that during the interview. I like to read and sometimes go to the movies. I'm out of my depth here.

'Fake and Gay, come on please come on.' The disembodied voice of air traffic control interrupts my reverie. Grayson responds, sounding in control and confident.

New York is getting closer. We are now on the very periphery. Wow! It looks stunning. New York at night, seen from the sky...

'Sounds good, doesn't it?' Grayson whispers.

I nod enthusiastically. It feels like another world - unreal - and I feel like I'm on a giant movie set, Sam's favorite movie perhaps, 'Bladerunner'. The memory of Sam's attempted kiss haunts me. I'm

starting to feel a little cruel for not calling him back. He can wait until tomorrow… surely.

'We'll be there in a few minutes,' Grayson mumbles, and suddenly my blood pats in my ears as my heart rate quickens and adrenaline rushes through my system. He starts talking to air traffic control again, but I no longer listen. Oh my… I think I'm going to pass out. My fate is in his hands.

We are now flying among the buildings, and ahead I can see a large skyscraper with a helipad at the top. The word Escala is painted white above the building. It's getting closer and closer, bigger and bigger… like my anxiety. God, I hope I don't let him down.

He will find me missing one way or another. I would have liked to listen to Maury and borrow one of his dresses, but I love my black jeans, and I'm wearing a soft mint green shirt and Maury's black jacket. I look smart enough. I squeeze the edge of my seat tighter and tighter. I can do it. I can do it. I chant this mantra as the skyscraper looms below us.

The helicopter slows down and hovers, and Grayson lands it on the helipad

at the top of the building. My heart is in my mouth. I can't decide if it's out of nervous anticipation, relief that we arrived alive, or fear of failure somehow. It cuts off the ignition and the rotor blades are slow and quiet until all I hear is the sound of my erratic breathing.

Grayson takes off his headphones, reaches out his hand, and takes mine off too.

'We're here,' he said softly.

His gaze is so intense, half in the shadows and half in the brilliant white light of the landing lights. Black knight and white knight, that's an apt metaphor for Grayson. He looks tense. His jaw is tight and his eyes are tight. He unbuckles his seat belt and reaches out to unbuckle mine. Her face is inches from mine.

'You have nothing to do that you don't want to. You know that, don't you?' His tone is so serious, even desperate, his gray eyes passionate. He takes me by surprise.

'I would never do anything I didn't want to do, Grayson.' And as I say those words, I don't quite feel their conviction

because right now - I would probably do anything for that man sitting next to me. But it does the trick. He is at peace.

He looks at me warily for a moment and somehow, even though he's so tall, he does so to Billie fully make his way to the helicopter door and open it. He jumps up, waiting for me to follow him, and takes my hand as I climb onto the helipad. It is very windy above the building, and I am worried that I am standing at least thirty stories in an open space. Grayson wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me tightly against him.

'Come on,' he cries over the sound of the wind. He leads me to an elevator shaft and, after typing a number on a keypad, the doors open. It is warm inside and all in mirrored glass. I can see Grayson endlessly everywhere I look, and the wonderful thing is he holds me endlessly too. Grayson types another code on the keypad, then the doors close and the elevator descends.

Moments later, we are in an all-white foyer. In the middle is a dark wood round table with an incredibly huge bouquet of white flowers on it. On the walls, there are paintings everywhere. It opens

two double doors, and the white theme continues through the wide hallway and directly opposite where a lavish room opens. This is the main living room, double-height. Huge is too small a word for that. The back wall is glass and leads to a balcoPittsburgh that overlooks New York.

To the right is an imposing 'U' shaped sofa that comfortably seats ten adults. It faces a modern, state-of-the-art stainless steel fireplace - or maybe platinum for all I know -.

The fire is lit and blazes slowly. On the left next to us, near the entrance, is the kitchen area.

All white with dark wood worktops and a large breakfast bar that seats six.

Near the kitchen, in front of the glass wall, is a dining table surrounded by sixteen chairs. And tucked away in the corner is a shiny black grand piano. Oh yeah... he probably plays the piano too. There is the art of all shapes and sizes on all the walls. This apartment looks more like a gallery than a living space.

'May I take your jacket?' Grayson asks. I shake my head. I'm still cold from the wind on the helipad.

'Would you like a drink?' he asks. I blink at him. After last night! Does he try to be funny For a second, I think about asking for a margarita - but I don't have the courage?

'I'm going to have a glass of white wine, would you like to join me?'

'Yes, please,' I whisper.

I am standing in this huge room, feeling out of place. I walk over to the glass wall and realize that the bottom half of the wall opens up like an accordion to the balcoPittsburgh. New York is lit and animated in the background. I go back to the kitchen area - it takes a few seconds, it's so far from the glass wall - and Grayson opens a bottle of wine. He took off his jacket.

'Pouilly Fume suits you?'

'I don't know anything about wine, Grayson. I'm sure it will be fine.' My voice is soft and hesitant. My heart is beating. I want to run. It's really rich. Seriously exaggerated Bill Gates style richness. What

am I doing here? You know very well what you are doing here - my subconscious is laughing at me. Yeah, I want to be in Grayson Maury's bed.

'Here.' He hands me a glass of wine. Even the glasses are rich... heavy, contemporary, crystal. I take a sip and the wine is light, crunchy, and delicious.

'You're very calm, and you don't even blush. Actually - I think it's the palest I've ever seen you, Naddalin,' he whispered. 'You are hungry?'

I shake my head. Not for the food.

'It's a very big place that you have here.'

'Large?'

'Large.'

'It's big,' he nods, and his eyes sparkle with amusement. I take another sip of the wine.

'Are you playing?' I point my chin towards the piano.

'Yes.'

'Good?'

'Yes.'

'Of course you do. Is there something you can't do well?'

'Yes... a few little things.' He takes a sip of his wine. He doesn't take his eyes off me. I can feel them following me as I turn and look around this large room. The bedroom is the wrong word.

It's not a play - it's a mission statement.

'Do you want to sit down?'

I nod, and he takes my hand and leads me over to the large off-white sofa. As I sit down, I am struck by the fact that I have the impression that Tess Durbeyfield is looking at the new house which belongs to the famous Alec D'Urberville. This thought makes me smile.

'What's so fun?' He sits down next to me, turning to face me. He rests his head on his right hand, his elbow resting on the back of the sofa.

'Why did you specifically give me Tess des D'Urbervilles?' I ask. Grayson looks at me for a moment. I think he is surprised by my question.

'Well, you said you liked Thomas Hardy.'

'Is that the only reason?' Even I can hear the disappointment in my voice. Her mouth presses into a hard line.

'It seemed appropriate to me. I could hold you to an incredibly high ideal like Angel Clare or completely debase you like Alec D'Urberville,' he murmurs, and his gray eyes blink dark and dangerous.

'If there are only two choices, I'll take the debasement.' I whisper looking at him. My subconscious looks at me in awe. He gasps.

'Naddalin, please stop biting your lip. It is very entertaining. You don't know what you are saying.

'That's the reason I'm here.'

He frowns.

'Yes. Could you excuse me for a second?' He disappears through a wide door on the other side of the room. He left for a few minutes and returned with a document.

'It's a nondisclosure agreement.' He shrugs his shoulders and has Billie looking a little embarrassed. 'My lawyer insists on this.' He hands it to me. I am completely confused. 'If you go for option two, debasement, you'll have to sign this.'

'What if I don't want to sign anything?'

'So those are Angel Clare's high ideals, well, for most books anyway.'

'What does this agreement mean?'

'It means you can't reveal anything about us. Nothing, to anyone.'

I look at him in disbelief. Holy shit. It's bad, really bad, and now I'm very curious about it.

'Okay. I'll sign.'

He hands me a pen.

'Aren't you even going to read it?'

'No.'

He frowns.

'Naddalin, you should always read everything you sign,' he berates me.

'Grayson, what you don't understand is that I wouldn't tell anyone about us anyway.' Evan Maury. So it doesn't matter if I sign an agreement or not. If that means so much to you or your lawyer... who you are talking to obviously, then fine. I will sign. '

He looks at me and he nods gravely.

'Good point well done, Miss Black.'

I sign generously on the dotted line on both copies and return one to him. Folding the other one, I place my purse and take a big sip of my wine. I look so much braver than I feel.

'Does that mean you're going to make love to me tonight, Grayson?' Holy shit. Did I just say His mouth opens a little, but He recovers quickly?

'No Naddalin, it's not. First, I'm not having sex. I'm fucking... hard. Second, there's a lot more paperwork to do, and third, you don't know yet. What you're into. You could always run for the hills. Come on, I want to show you my playroom. '

My mouth opens. Fuck hard! Holy shit, that looks so... hot. But why are we looking at a playroom? I am confused.

'Want to play on your Xbox?' I ask. He laughs loudly.

'No, Naddalin, no Xbox, no Playstation. Come on.' He stands up, holding out his hand. I let him lead me back to the hallway. To the right of the double doors, where we entered, another door leads to a staircase. We go up to the second floor and turn right. Pulling a key out of his pocket, he unlocks another door and takes a deep breath.

'You can leave anytime. The helicopter is ready to take you when you want to go, you can stay the night and come home in the morning. It's okay whatever you decide.'

'Just open the fucking door, Grayson.

He opens the door and steps back to let me in. I watch it once more. I want to know what's there. I take a deep breath.

-And-

I feel like I have traveled back in time to the 16th century and the Spanish Inquisition.

Holy shit.

The first thing I notice is the smell; leather, wood, polished with a slight citrus scent. It's very pleasant and the lighting is soft, subtle. I actually can't see the source, but it's around the ledge in the room, giving off an ambient glow. The walls and ceiling are deep, dark burgundy, giving a womb effect to the spacious room, and the floor is in old varnished wood. There is a large X-shaped wooden cross attached to the wall facing the doorway. It is made of polished mahogany and there are retaining cuffs at each corner. Above it is a cast-iron grating suspended from the ceiling, at least eight square feet in size, and from which hang all kinds of ropes, chains, and glittering chains. Near the door, two long poles polished and richly carved, like the spindles of a banister, but longer, hang like curtain rods through the wall. From them swing a surprising assortment of paddles, whips, whips, and fun feathered instruments.

Beside the door is a sizable mahogany chest of drawers, each drawer slender as if designed to hold specimens in

a crisp old museum. I briefly wonder what the drawers contain. Do I want to know? In the far corner is an upholstered bench in cowhide leather, and attached to the wall next to it is a polished wooden stand that looks like a billiard or billiard cue holder, but when you look at it more. It contains canes of different lengths and widths. There's a sturdy six-foot-long table in the opposite corner - polished wood with intricately carved legs - and two matching stools underneath.

But what dominates the room is a bed. It is larger than the king-size, an ornately carved Rococo four-poster with a flat top. Looks like the end of the 19th century. Under the canopy, can see more chains and sparkling cuffs. There is no bedding... just a mattress covered in red leather and red satin cushions stacked at one end.

At the foot of the bed, aside from a few feet away, is a large oxblood chesterfield sofa, just wedged in the middle of the room facing the bed. A strange arrangement... of having a sofa facing the bed, and I smile to myself - I chose the sofa as strange when in reality it is the most mundane piece of furniture in the room. I

look up and stare at the ceiling. There are carabiners all over the ceiling at odd intervals. I vaguely wonder what they are for. Strangely enough, all the wood, dark walls, moody lighting, and oxblood leather make the room soft and romantic... I know that's it but, this is Grayson's version. Sweet and romantic.

I turn around, and he looks at me intently as I knew he would be, his expression completely unreadable. I walk further into the room and he follows me. The feathery thing intrigued me. I touch it hesitantly. It's suede, like a little cat with nine tails but bushier, and there are very small plastic beads at the end.

'It's called a whip,' Grayson's voice is calm and soft.

A whip... hmm. I think I am in shock. My subconscious migrated or was stunned or just collapsed and expired. I am numb. I can observe and absorb but not articulate my feelings about it all because I am in shock. What is the appropriate response to finding out a potential lover is a completely bizarre sadist or masochist Fear... yes... that seems to be the dominant feeling. I recognize him now. But oddly not from him - I don't think he would have hurt

me, well, not without my consent. So many questions cloud my mind.

Why? How? When? How many times? I walk over to the bed and run my hands over one of the intricately carved poles. The post is very robust, the craftsmanship exceptional.

'Say something,' Grayson orders, his voice deceptively soft.

'Are you doing this to people or are they doing it to you?'

His mouth twists, amused or relieved.

'People?' He blinks several times as he considers his answer. 'I do this to women who want me to do it.'

I do not understand.

'If you have volunteer volunteers, why am I here?'

'Because I really want to do this with you.'

'Oh,' I gasp. Why?

I wander to the far corner of the room and pat the high-waisted padded

bench and run my fingers over the leather. He likes to hurt women. This thought depresses me.

'Are you a sadist?'

'I am a Dominant.' His eyes are a burning, intense gray.

'What does it mean?' I whisper.

'It means that I want you to surrender yourself willingly to me, in all things.'

I frown as I try to digest this idea.

'Why should I do this?'

'To please me,' he whispers, tilting his head to one side, and I see a ghost grinning.

Please him! He wants me to please him! I think my mouth is opening. Please, Grayson Maury. And I realize, at that point, that yes, that's exactly what I want to do. I want him to be damn happy with me. It's a revelation.

'In very simple terms, I want you to want to please me,' he said softly. Her voice is hypnotic.

'How do I do that?' My mouth is dry and I wish I had more wine. Okay, I understand what's joking, but I'm puzzled by the setting up of the sweet-boudoir-ElizabPaul torture. Do I want to know the answer?

'I have rules, and I want you to follow them. They are for your benefit and for my pleasure. If you follow these rules to my satisfaction, I will reward you. Otherwise, I'll punish you, and you'll learn, 'he whispers. I glance at the cane stand as he says this.

'And where is all of this located?' I wave my hand in the general direction of the room.

'It's all part of the incentive package. Reward and punishment.'

'Then you will get your kicks by exerting your will on me.'

'It's about earning your trust and respect, so you'll let me exercise my will on you.

I will gain a lot of pleasure, joy, even in your submission. The more you submit, the greater my joy - it's a very simple equation.'

'Okay, and what do I get out of it?'

He shrugs his shoulders and almost looks sorry.

'Me,' he said simply.

Oh my. Grayson runs his hand through his hair as he looks at me.

'You won't reveal anything, Naddalin,' he whispers exasperatedly. 'Let's go back downstairs where I can concentrate better. It's very distracting to have you here.

He holds out his hand to me, and now I hesitate to take it.

Maury had said he was dangerous, she was so right. How did she know it was dangerous to my health, because I know I will say yes. And part of me doesn't want to.

Part of me wants to run screaming from this room and everything it stands for. I'm so out of my depth here.

'I'm not going to hurt you, Naddalin.' His gray eyes are pleading and I know he's telling the truth. I take his hand and he leads me out the door.

'If you do this, let me show you.' Rather than come back downstairs, he comes straight out of the playroom, as he calls it, and walks down a hallway. We go through several doors to the one at the end. Beyond is a bedroom with a large double bed, all in white... everything, furniture, walls, bedding. It's barren and cold but with the most glorious view of New York through the glass wall.

'This will be your room. You can decorate it however you want, have what you want here.'

'My room, do you expect me to move?' I can't hide the horror in my voice.

'Not full time. Just say, Friday night through Sunday. We have to talk about all this, negotiate. If you want to do that,' he adds in a calm, hesitant voice.

'Am I going to sleep here?'

'Yes.'

'Not with you.'

'No. I told you, I don't sleep with anyone except you when you're stunned to drink.' His eyes are rebuking.

My mouth presses into a hard line. This is what I cannot reconcile. Kind and caring Grayson, who saves me from drunkenness and gently holds me while I vomit in azaleas, and the monster who has whips and chains in a special room.

'Where do you sleep?'

'My room is downstairs. Come on, you must be hungry.

'Oddly, it looks like I've lost my appetite,' I whisper excitedly.

'You must eat, Naddalin,' he warns and, taking my hand, leads me back downstairs.

Back in the incredibly large room, I am filled with deep apprehension. I am on the edge of a precipice and I have to decide whether or not to jump.

'I am fully aware that this is a dark path that I am leading you Naddalin, which is why I really want you to think about it. You must have questions,' he said as he wandered into the kitchen, releasing me. hand.

I do. But where to start?

'You signed your NDA, you can ask me anything you want, and I will answer.'

I stand at the breakfast counter watching him as he opens the fridge and pulls out a plate of different cheeses with two large bunches of green and red grapes. He places the plate on the worktop and proceeds to cut a French baguette.

'Sit.' He points to one of the stools in the breakfast bar and I obey his order.

If I want to do this, I'm going to have to get used to it. I realize he's also bossy since I first met him.

'You mentioned the paperwork.'

'Yes.'

'What paperwork?'

'Well, other than the NDA, a contract that says what we will do and what we will not do. I need to know your limits, and you need to know mine. It's consensual, Naddalin.

'What if I don't want to do this?'

'That's good,' he said cautiously.

'But we won't have any kind of relationship?' I ask.

'No.'

'Why?'

'It's the only kind of relationship I'm interested in.'

'Why?'

He shrugs his shoulders.

'This is how I am.'

'How did you become like this?'

'Why is someone like that? It's a little hard to answer. Why do some people like cheese and others hate it? Do you like cheese? Mrs. Jones - my housekeeper - left this for supper. 'He takes large white plates from a cupboard and places one in front of me.

We're talking about cheese... Holy shit.

'What are your rules that I must follow?'

'I wrote them down. We'll go through them after we've eaten.'

Food. How can I eat now?

'I'm really not hungry,' I whisper.

'You're going to eat,' he said simply. Dominating Grayson, everything becomes clear. 'Would you like another glass of wine?'

'Yes please.'

He pours wine into my glass and comes to sit next to me. I take a hasty sip.

'Help yourself to eat, Naddalin.'

I take a small bunch of grapes. I can do it. He narrows his eyes. 'Have you been like this for a while?' I ask. 'Yes.' 'Is it easy to find women who want to do this?' He raises an eyebrow at me. 'You would be amazed,' he said dryly. 'So why am I not getting it?' 'Naddalin, I told you. There's something about you. I can't leave you alone.' He smiles ironically. 'I am like a moth to a flame.' Her voice darkens. 'I want you, especially now when you bite your lip again.' He takes a deep breath and swallows. My stomach is somersaulting - it wants me... weirdly, that's right, but this strange, perverted handsome man wants me. 'I think you got this cliché the wrong way.' I growl. I am the moth and he is the

flame, and I am going to burn myself. I know. 'Eat!' 'No.

I haven't signed anything yet, so I think I'll keep my free will a bit longer if that's okay with you.' Her eyes soften and her lips meet in a smile. 'As you wish, Miss Black.' 'How many women? I blurt out the question, but I'm so curious. 'Fifteen.' Oh... not as much as I thought. 'For long periods?' 'Some of them, yes.' 'Have you ever hurt someone?' 'Yes.' Holy shit. ' Wrong?' 'No.' 'Do you want to hurt me? 'What do you mean?' 'Physically, are you going to hurt me?' 'I'll punish you when you need it, and it will be painful.' I think I feel a little weak. I take another sip of the wine. Alcohol - it will make me brave. 'Have you ever been beaten? I ask. '

Yes.' Oh... that surprises me. Before I can question him further about this revelation, he interrupts my thought. 'Let's talk about this in my office. I want to show you something. It's so hard to deal with. Here, I foolishly thought that I would spend a night of unparalleled passion in this man's bed, and we are negotiating this strange arrangement. I follow him to his office, a spacious room with another bay window that opens onto the balcony. He sits down

on the desk, gestures for me to sit on a leather chair in front of him, and hands me a piece of paper. 'These are the rules. They can be subject to change. They are part of the contract, which you can also have. Read these rules and let's discuss them.'

RULES Obedience: The Submissive will obey all instructions given by the Dominant immediately, without hesitation or reservation, and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will accept any sexual activity deemed suitable and pleasurable by the Dominant, except for activities which are described within strict limits (Annex 2.)

She will do so with eagerness and without hesitation. Sleep: The Submissive will ensure that she achieves a minimum of seven hours of sleep per night when not with the Dominant. Food: The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and well-being from a list of prescribed foods (Appendix 4.) The Submissive will not snack between meals, except for fruit. Clothing: During the term of office, the Submitter will wear clothing only approved by the Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for the Submissive, which the Submissive will use.

The Dominant will accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis. If the Dominant so requires, the Submissive shall during the Term of Office such adornments as the Dominant requires, in the presence of the Dominant and at such other time as the Dominant deems appropriate. Exercise: The Dominant will provide the Submitter with a personal trainer four times per week in one-hour sessions at times to be mutually agreed upon between the personal trainer and the Submitter. The personal trainer will report to the Dominant on the progress of the Submissive. Personal Hygiene / Beauty: La Soumise will keep herself clean and shaved and/or shaved at all times.

The Submissive will visit a beauty salon chosen by the Dominant at times decided by the Dominant, and undergo any treatment the Dominant deems appropriate. Personal Safety: The submissive does not drink to excess, does not smoke, does not take recreational drugs, and does not put herself in unnecessary danger. Personal Suitability: The Submissive will not enter into a sexual relationship with anyone other than the Dominant.

The Submissive will conduct herself at all times respectfully and modestly. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection of the Dominant. She will be held responsible for any mischief, wrongdoing, and misconduct committed when she is not in the presence of the Dominant. Failure to comply with any of the above conditions will result in immediate punishment, the nature of which will be determined by the Dominant. Holy shit. 'Strict limits?' I ask.

'Yes. What you won't do, what I won't do, we have to spell out in our agreement.' 'I'm not sure if I will accept money for clothes. It's not okay.' I move uncomfortably, the word 'ho' echoes in my head. 'I want to give you some money, let me buy you some clothes. I might need you to accompany me to the receptions, and I want you to be well dressed. I'm sure your pay, when you get a job, won't cover the kind of clothes I would like you to wear. ' I don't have to wear them when I'm not with you? ' 'No.' 'Okay.' Think of them as uniforms. 'I don't want to exercise four times a week.' 'Naddalin, I need you to be flexible, strong, and with stamina. Believe me, you need to exercise. 'But surely not four times a week, how about three?' 'I

want you to do four.' 'I thought it was a negotiation?' He squeezes my lips. 'Okay, Miss Black, another point well done. How about an hour in three days and a day in half an hour?' 'Three days, three hours. I feel like you're going to work out for me when I'm here.' He smiles nastily and his eyes shine as relieved.

'Yes, I am. Okay, okay. Are you sure you don't want to do an internship with my company? You're a good negotiator.' 'No, I don't think that's a good idea.' I look at his rules. Waxing! Hair removal what? All 'So the limits. They're mine.' He hands me another piece of paper. Strict limits No acts involving fire games No acts involving urination or defecation and their products No acts involving needles, knives, piercings or blood No acts involving gynecological medical instruments No acts involving children or animals No acts which will leave permanent marks on the skin No acts involving the control of breathing Ugh. He must note them!

2

Of course - they all sound very sane, and frankly, necessarily... surely

anyone in their right mind would want to be involved in this sort of thing? Although I now feel a little uncomfortable. 'Is there anything you would like to add?' he asks gently. Shit. I've no idea. I am completely confused. He looks at me and frowns. 'Is there something you won't do?' 'I do not know.' 'What do you mean you don't know?' I squirm uncomfortably and bite my lip. 'I have never done anything like this.'

'Well, when you've had sex, is there anything you didn't like to do?' For the first time in ages, I blush. 'You can tell me, Naddalin. We have to be honest with each other or it won't work. I squirm uncomfortably again and look at my knotted fingers. 'Tell me,' he orders. 'Well... I've never had sex before so I don't know.' My voice is small. I look at him, and he looks at me, his mouth open, frozen and pale - pale. 'Never?' he whispers. I shake my head. 'You're a virgin?' he breathes. I nod, blushing again. He closes his eyes and seems to be counting to ten. When he opens them again, he is angry and looks at me. 'Why didn't you tell me?' he growls.

Grayson runs both hands through his hair and paced around his office.

Two hands - it's a double exasperation. His usual concrete control seems to have slipped a notch.

'I don't understand why you didn't tell me,' he berates me.

'The subject was never brought up. I'm not in the habit of revealing my sexual status to anyone I meet. I mean, we barely know each other.' I look at my hands. Why do I feel guilty? Why is he so crazy? I am watching him.

'Well you know a lot more about me now,' he snaps, his mouth pressing into a hard line. 'I knew you were inexperienced, but a virgin!' He says it like it's a really dirty word.

'Damn, Naddalin, I just showed you,' he moaned. 'That God forgives me. Have you ever been kissed except by me?

'Of course I have.' I do my best to look offended. Okay... maybe twice.

'And a nice young man didn't sweep you away, I just don't understand.' You are twenty-one, almost twenty-two. You are beautiful. He runs his hand through his hair again.

Beautiful. I blush with pleasure. Grayson Maury thinks I am beautiful. I tie my fingers together, staring at them, trying to hide my awkward smile. Maybe he's myopic, my subconscious has raised its sleepwalking head. Where was she when I needed her?

'And you are seriously discussing what I want to do, when you have no experience.'

His brow furrowed. 'How did you avoid sex, please tell me.'

I shrug my shoulders.

'No one really, you know.' Come to zero, only you. And you are kind of a monster. 'Why are you so angry with me?' I whisper.

'I'm not mad at you, I'm mad at myself. I just assumed...' He sighs. He looks at me with insight then shakes his head. 'Do you want to go?' he asks, his voice soft.

'No, unless you want me to go,' I whisper. Oh no... I don't want to leave.

'Of course not. I like having you here.' He frowns as he says this, then glances at his watch. 'It's late.' And he

turns to look at me. 'You bite your lip.' His voice is hoarse and he looks at me speculatively.

'Sorry.'

'Don't apologize. It's just that I want to bite too, hard.'

I gasp... how can he say things to me like that and not expect me to be affected.

'Come on,' he whispers. '

'What?'

'We will rectify the situation immediately.'

'What do you mean in this situation?'

'Your situation. Naddalin, I'm going to make love to you now.'

'Oh.' The ground fell. I am in a situation. I hold my breath.

'It's if you want to, I mean, I don't want to take my chances.'

'I thought you hadn't had sex. I thought you had fucked hard.' I swallow, my mouth is suddenly dry.

He gives me a nasty smile, the effects of which travel there.

'I can make an exception, or maybe combine the two, we'll see. I really want to make love to you. Please come to bed with me. I want our arrangement to work, but you really have it. need to have an idea what you are getting yourself into. We can start your training tonight - with the basics. That doesn't mean I came with all my hearts and flowers, it's a means to an end, but the one I want, and I hope you do too. ' His gray gaze is intense.

I blush... oh my... wishes come true.

'But I haven't done everything you demand from your rule list.' My voice is all panting, hesitant.

'Forget the rules. Forget all those details for tonight. I want you. I've wanted you ever since you fell in my office, and I know you want me. if you haven't. Please, Naddalin, spend the night with me. 'He holds out his hand to me, his eyes are

bright, fervent... excited, and I put my hand in his. He pulls me up and into his arms so I can feel the length of his body against mine, this quick action took me by surprise. He wraps his fingers around the back of his neck, wraps my ponytail around his wrist, and pulls gently so that I have to look at him. He looks at me.

'You are a brave young woman,' he whispers. 'I am in awe of you.'

His words are like a sort of incendiary device; my blood is on fire. He leans in and kisses my lips softly, and he sucks my bottom lip.

'I want to bite that lip,' he whispers against my mouth, and he pulls it gently with his teeth. I moan and he smiles.

'Please Naddalin let me make love to you.'

'Yes,' I whisper because that's what I'm here for. His smile is triumphant as he releases me, takes my hand, and leads me through the apartment.

His room is large. High-ceiling windows overlook a high-rise, illuminated New York City.

The walls are white and the furniture is pale blue. The huge bed is ultra-modern, made from raw Maury wood, like driftwood, four posts, but no canopy. On the wall above there is a beautiful painting of the sea.

I tremble like a leaf. That's it. Finally, after all this time, I'm going to do it, with none other than Grayson Maury. My breathing is shallow and I can't take my eyes off him.

He takes off his watch and places it on a dresser that matches the bed, and takes off his jacket, setting it on a chair. He is dressed in his white linen shirt and jeans.

He is breathtakingly beautiful. His dark brassy hair is messy, his shirt hanging down - his daring bold gray eyes. He gets out of his Converse shoes and bends down and takes off his socks individually. Grayson Maury's feet… wow… what are bare feet Turning, he looks at me, his expression soft.

'I guess you're not on the pill.'

What! Shit.

'I didn't mean it.' He opens the top drawer of the safe and removes a package of condoms. He looks at me intently.

'Be prepared,' he whispers. 'Do you want the blinds drawn?'

'It does not bother me.' I whisper. 'I thought you didn't let anyone sleep in your bed.'

'Who said we're going to sleep?' he whispers.

'Oh.' Good heaven.

He walks slowly towards me. Confident, sexy, flaming eyes and my heart is pounding. My blood circulates in my body. The desire, thick and hot, flow in my stomach. He is standing in front of me, looking me in the eye. He's so hot.

'Let's take that jacket off, okay?' he said softly, he grabbed the lapels and gently slid my jacket off my shoulders. He places it on the chair.

'Do you have any idea what I want from you, Naddalin Black?' he whispers. My breathing is blocked. I can't take my eyes off hers. He reaches out and gently runs his fingers down my cheek to my chin.

'Do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you?' he adds, stroking my chin.

The muscles inside the deepest, darkest part of me are contracting most deliciously.

The pain is so soft and sharp that I want to close my eyes, but I am mesmerized by her gray eyes which fervently fix mine. Leaning forward, he kisses me. Her lips are demanding, firm and slow, hugging mine. He begins to unbutton my shirt as he places feather-shaped kisses on my jaw, chin, and corners of my mouth. Slowly he pulls it away from me and drops it to the floor. He pulls back and looks at me. I'm wearing the perfect pale blue lace bra.

Thank God.

'Oh, Naddalin,' he hisses. 'You have the most beautiful skin, pale and flawless. I want to kiss every inch of it.'

I rinse. Oh my... Why did he say he couldn't have sex, I'll do whatever he wants.

He grabs my tie, pulls it off, and gasps as my hair cascades around my shoulders.

'I love brunettes,' he whispers, and both of his hands are in my hair, gripping either side of my head. His kiss is

demanding, his tongue and lips attracting mine. I moan and my tongue timidly meets his. He puts his arms around me and pulls me against his body, hugging me tightly. One hand stays in my hair, the other goes down my spine to my waist and towards my behind. His hand flexes on my back and squeezes gently.

He squeezes me against his hips, and I feel his erection, which he sinks languidly into me.

I moaned once more into his mouth. I can barely contain the rioting emotions or is it the hormones raging through my body. I want it so badly. Gripping his arms, I feel his biceps, he's surprisingly strong... muscular. Tentatively, I move my hands to her face and through her hair. Saint Moses. It's so sweet, unruly. I pull gently and he moans.

He walks me over to the bed until I can feel him behind my knees. I think he's going to push me down, but he doesn't. Releasing me, he suddenly falls to his knees. He grabs my hips with both hands and runs his tongue around my belly button, then gently bites his way to my hip bone, then through my stomach to my other hip bone.

'Ah,' I moan.

Seeing him kneeling in front of me, feeling his mouth on me, it's so unexpected and hot. My hands stay in her hair, pulling gently as I try to calm my to-loud breathing.

He looks at me through impossibly long lashes, his eyes a burning smoky gray. His hands go up and undo the button of my jeans, and he quietly pulls the zipper down.

Without taking his eyes off mine, his hands move under the belt, brushing against me and moving towards my behind. His hands slowly slide down my back to my thighs, removing my jeans as I go. I can't look away. He stops and licks his lips, never breaking eye contact. He leans forward, running his nose along the top between my thighs. I feel it.

'You smell so good,' he whispers and closes his eyes, a look of pure pleasure on his face, and I practically convulse. He reaches out and pulls the comforter off the bed, then gently pushes me so that I fall onto the mattress.

Still kneeling, he grabs my foot and undoes my Converse, removing my shoe and sock. I get up on my elbows to see what

he's doing. I was panting... I wanted to. He lifts my foot by the heel and runs his sticker over my instep. It's almost painful, but I can feel the movement echoing in my groin. I gasp. Not taking his eyes off mine, he runs his tongue again along my instep and then his teeth. Shit. I moan... how can I feel that now. I fall back on the bed, moaning. I hear his little laugh.

'Oh, Naddalin, what could I do to you?' He whispers. He takes off my other shoes and socks, then gets up and takes off my jeans. I'm lying on his bed, wearing only my bra and panties, and he looks at me.

'You are very beautiful, Naddalin Black. I can't wait to be inside of you.

Holy shit. His words. He's so handsome. It takes my breath away.

'Show me how you like yourself.

What I'm frowning about.

'Don't be shy, Naddalin, show me,' he whispers.

I shake my head.

'I don't know what you mean.' My voice is hoarse. I barely recognize him, full of desire.

'How you make yourself cum, I want to see.'

I shake my head.

'No,' I mumble. He raises his eyebrows, astonished for a moment, and his eyes darken, and he shakes his head in disbelief.

'Well, we'll have to see what we can do about it.' Her voice is soft, provocative, a delicious sensual threat. He undoes the buttons on his jeans and slowly pulls his jeans down, his eyes on mine the whole time. He leans over me and, grabbing each of my ankles, quickly spreads my legs and crawls on the bed between my legs. It hovers above me. I squirm in need.

'Stay still,' he whispers, then leans in and kisses the inside of my thigh, dragging kisses across the thin lace of my panties, kissing me.

Oh... I can't be quiet. How not to move, I squirm under him.

'We're going to have to work to keep you quiet, baby.' He trails kisses on my stomach and his tongue plunges into my navel. He's still heading north, kissing me on my chest.

My skin is burning. I blushed, too hot, too cold, and I scratched the sheet under me. He's laid down next to me and his hand moves up from my hip to my waist and chest. He looks at me, his expression is unreadable, and gently takes my chest.

'You fit my hand perfectly, Naddalin,' he whispers and plunges his index finger into the cup of my bra and gently pulls it down to free my chest, but the yarn and fabric of the cup push it up. Her finger moves to my other breast and repeats the process. My breasts swell, and my nipples harden under his gaze. I am tied up by my bra. 'Very pretty,' he whispers appreciatively, and my nipples harden even more.

He blows very gently on one as his hand moves to my other breast, and his thumb slowly rolls the end of my nipple, lengthening it. I moaned, feeling the sweet sensation even in my groin. I am so moldy. Oh please, I beg inwardly as my fingers grip the sheet more firmly. His lips close around

my other nipple and he pulls, I almost convulse.

'Let's see if we can make you cum like this,' he whispers, continuing his slow and sultry assault. My nipples carry the delicious weight of her skillful fingers and lips, igniting every nerve ending in my body so that my whole body sings with sweet agony.

It just doesn't stop.

'Oh... please,' I beg you, and I pull my head back, my mouth open as I moan, my legs stiffen. What the hell is going on with me?

'Let go, baby,' he whispers. His teeth close around my nipple, and his thumb and finger pull hard, and I collapse into his hands, my body twitching and shattering into pieces. He kisses me deeply, his tongue in my mouth absorbing my cries.

Oh my. It was extraordinary. Now I know what it is. He looks at me, a satisfied smile on his face when I'm sure there's nothing but gratitude and awe on mine.

'You are very responsive,' he breathes. 'You're going to have to learn to

control this, and it's going to be so much fun teaching you how.' He kisses me again.

My breathing is still irregular as I descend from my orgasm. His hand goes down my waist, to my hips, then squeezes me tightly... Jeez. Her finger slides through the fine lace and slowly turns around me - there. He briefly closes his eyes and his breathing stops.

'You are so deliciously wet. My God, I want you.' He sticks his finger inside me, and I scream as he does it over and over again. He palms my clit and I scream once more. He pushes me harder and harder. I moan.

Suddenly he sits up and takes my panties off and throws them on the floor. By removing his underwear, his erection is released. Holy cow... He reaches for his bedside table and grabs a bundle of foil, then moves between my legs, spreading them further.

He kneels and puts on a condom along its considerable length. Oh no... does he want how.

'Don't worry,' he breathes, his mine eyes, 'You are developing too.' He leans

down, his hands on either side of my head, so he hovers above me, looking me in the eye, jaw clenched, eyes burning. It's only now that I sign up that he's still wearing his shirt.

'Do you really want to do this?' he asks softly.

'Please,' I beg you.

'Roll up your knees,' he orders softly, and I'm quick to obey. 'I'm going to fuck you now, Miss Black,' he whispered, positioning the head of his erection at the entrance to my cock. 'Hard,' he whispers and hits me.

'Aargh! I cry as I feel a strange pinching sensation deep inside me as he tears my virginity apart. He freezes, looking at me, his eyes shining with ecstatic triumph.

Her mouth is slightly open and her breathing is rough. He moans.

'You are so tight. Are you okay?'

I nod, my eyes were wide, my hands on his forearms. I feel so full. He stays still, letting me acclimate to the

intrusive and overwhelming feeling of him inside me.

'I'm going to move, baby,' he breathes after a moment, his voice tight.

Oh.

He relaxes with exquisite slowness. And he closes his eyes and moans and sinks into me again. I scream a second time and he stops.

'After?' he whispers, his voice harsh.

'Yes,' I breathe. He does it once more and comes to a stop again.

I moan. My body accepted it... Oh, I want this.

'Again?' he breathes.

'Yes.' It is a plea.

-And-

Then he moves, but this time he doesn't stop. He gets up on his elbows so I can feel his weight on me, holding me back. He moves slowly at first, settling in and out of me. And as I get used to the alien feel, my hips tentatively move to meet hers.

He accelerates. I moan, and he hammers, accelerating, mercilessly, an unrelenting rhythm, and I continue, responding to his punches. He grabs my head in his hands and kisses me hard, his teeth pulling against my lower lip again. He moves slightly and I can feel something building up deep inside me, just like before. I start to stiffen as he pushes over and over again. My body shudders tilt, a gleam of sweat accumulates on me. Oh my... I didn't know it would feel like this... I didn't know it could feel that good. My thoughts are dispersing… there is only the feeling… only him… only me… oh please… I stiffen.

'Come for me, Naddalin,' he whispers breathlessly, and I untangle myself at his words, exploding around him as I cum and shatter into a million pieces beneath him. And as he comes, he screams my name, pushing hard, then flies, emptying himself into me.

I'm still panting, trying to slow my breathing down, my heart pounding, and my thoughts are in turmoil. Wow… that was amazing. I open my eyes and he has his forehead pressed against mine, eyes closed, breathing irregularly. Grayson's eyes open and look at me, dark but soft. He is still in

me. Leaning down, he gently presses a kiss against my forehead and then slowly pulls away from me.

'Ooh.' I wince at the ignorance.

'Did I hurt you?' Grayson asks as he lies down next to me, propped up on one elbow. He tucks a section of my hair behind my ear. And I have to smile broadly.

'Are you asking me if you hurt me?'

'The iroPittsburgh is not lost on me,' he smiles Naddalindonically. 'Seriously, are you okay?' His eyes are intense, sounding, demanding even.

I lay down beside him, feeling my limbs lose, my bones like jelly, but I am relaxed, deeply relaxed. I smile at him. I can't stop smiling. Now I know what it is.

Four orgasms... parting at the seams, like the spin cycle on a washing machine, wow.

I had no idea what my body was capable of, could be hurt so tightly and released so violently, so rewarding. The pleasure was indescribable.

'You bite your lip, and you haven't answered me.' He frowns. I smirked at him playfully. He looks glorious with his tousled hair, searing shrunken gray eyes, and serious dark expression.

'I'd love to do that again,' I whisper. For a moment, I think I see a slight relief on his face before the shutters come down, and he looks at me through hooded eyes.

'Would you like now, Miss Black?' he whispers dryly. He leans in and kisses me very softly at the corner of my mouth. 'The demanding little things aren't you. Light up your forehead.'

I blink at him momentarily, then turn around. He unhooked my bra and ran his hand down my back to my behind.

'You really have the best skin,' he whispers. He moves so that one of his legs pushes between mine, and he's half-lying on my back. I can feel the buttons of his shirt press against me as he picks up my hair over my face and kisses my bare shoulder.

'Why are you wearing your shirt?' I ask. He stops moving. After a while, he pulls out of his shirt and lies back on top of

me. I feel her warm skin against mine. Hmm... it's divine. He has a thin layer of hair on his chest, which tickles my back.

'So you want me to fuck you again?' it whispers in my ear, and it starts dragging feather-light kisses around my ear and down my neck.

His hand moves down, brushing my waist, over my hip and thigh to the back of my knee. He pushes my knee higher, and my breathing locks in... oh my God, what is he doing now? He moves so he is between my legs, pressed against my back, and his hand goes up my thigh to my behind. He slowly strokes my cheek, then slides his fingers between my legs.

'I'll take you from behind, Naddalin,' he whispers, and with his other hand, he grabs my hair at the back of my neck in a fist and pulls it gently, holding me in place. I can't move my head. I am stuck under him, helpless.

'You are mine,' he whispers. 'Only mine. Don't forget that.' Her voice is intoxicating, her words heady, seductive. I feel his growing erection against my thigh.

Her long fingers reach round to gently massage my clit, slowly rotating. His breath is soft against my face as he slowly pinches me along my jaw.

'You smell divine,' he snuggled up behind my ear. Her hand rubs against me, round and round. Reflexively, my hips start to spin, reflecting his hand, as excruciating pleasure rushes through my blood like adrenaline.

'Stay still,' he orders, his voice soft but urgent, and slowly he inserts his thumb inside me, spinning it around, stroking the front wall of my vagina. The effect is breathtaking - all my energy is focused on this small space inside my body. I moan.

'You like this?' He asks softly, his teeth brushing against my outer ear, and he begins to slowly flex his thumb, in, out, in, out... his fingers are still spinning.

I close my eyes, trying to keep my breathing under control, trying to absorb the messy, chaotic sensations his fingers are unleashing on me, fire roaming my body. I moan again.

'You're so wet, so fast. So responsive. Oh, Naddalin, I like it. I really like it.'

~*~

And.. he whispers.

I want to stiffen my legs, but I can't move. He pins me, maintains a constant, slow, and torturous rhythm. It is exquisite. I moan again and he suddenly moves.

'Open your mouth,' he orders and sticks his thumb in my mouth. My eyes open, blinking wildly.

'See how you taste,' he hisses against my ear. 'Suck me, baby.' His thumb presses on my tongue, and my mouth closes around him, sucking wildly. I taste the salinity of his thumb and the slight metallic flavor of blood. Holy shit. This is wrong, but hell is it erotic.

'I want to kiss your mouth, Naddalin, and I will soon.' His voice is hoarse, raw, his breathing more disjointed.

Fuck my mouth! I moan and bite him. He gasps, and he squeezes my hair tighter, painfully, so I let him go.

'Naughty, nice girl,' he whispers, then reaches for the bedside table for a sachet of foil. 'Stay still, don't move,' he orders, releasing my hair.

He tears the sheet apart as I breathe hard, my blood singing through my veins. The anticipation is exhilarating. He leans over, his weight on me again, and he grabs my hair, holding my head still. I can not move. I'm attracted to him, and he's ready to take me back.

'We're going to go really, slowly this time, Naddalin,' he hisses.

-And-

Slowly it enters me until it is buried in me. Stretch, fill, relentless. I moan loudly. It's deeper this time, delicious. I moan again, and he deliberately circles his hips and pulls back, pauses, then comes back easily.

He repeats this movement over and over again. It drives me crazy - it's teasing, deliberately slow thrusts, and the intermittent feeling of fullness are overwhelming.

'You feel so-o good,' he moans, and my insides start to shake. He backs up and waits.

'Oh no, baby, not yet,' he whispers, and as the thrill ceases, he begins the whole delicious process again.

'Oh, please,' I beg you. I'm not sure I can take much more. My body is so tight, eager to break free.

'I want you to hurt, baby,' he whispers, and continues his gentle torment, back, forward.

'Every time you move tomorrow, I want to be reminded that I've been here.' Just me. You're mine.

I moan.

'Please, Grayson,' I whisper.

'What do you want, Naddalin, tell me.'

I moan again. He pulls back and slowly comes back inside me, circling his hips again.

'Tell me,' he whispers.

'You, please.'

He increases the pace endlessly and his breathing becomes more erratic. My insides start to speed up and Grayson picks up the pace.

'You. Are. So. Sweet,' he mutters between each thrust. 'I want you so much.'

I moan.

'You. Are. Mine. Come for me, baby,' he growls.

His words are my downfall, knocking me over the precipice. My body convulses around him, and I come, loudly shouting a distorted version of his name into the mattress, and Grayson follows him with two sudden thrusts, and he freezes, pouring into me as he finds his release. He collapses on top of me, his face in my hair.

'Damn. Naddalin,' he hisses. He immediately gets out of me and rolls onto the side of the bed. I pull my knees to my chest, completely exhausted, and immediately drift or pass out in exhausted sleep.

When- I wake up it's still dark. I have no idea how long I slept. I stretch out under the duvet and feel sore, deliciously sore. Grayson cannot be found. I sit down,

looking at the cityscape in front of me. There are fewer lights on among the skyscrapers, and there is a whisper of dawn in the east. I hear the music. The melodious notes of the piano, a sad and sweet lament. Bach, I think, but I'm not sure.

I wrap the quilt around myself and quietly walk down the hall to the large room.

Grayson is at the piano, completely lost in the music he is playing. His expression is sad and desperate, like music. His game is breathtaking. Leaning against the wall at the entrance, I listen delighted. He's such an accomplished musician. He sits naked, his body bathed in the warm light cast by a solitary floor lamp beside the piano. With the rest of the large room in the dark, it's like he's in his own lonely, untouchable... lonely little puddle of light, in a bubble.

I walk quietly towards him, attracted by the sublime and melancholy music. I am fascinated to watch his long, skillful fingers as they find and gently press down on the keys, thinking about how those same fingers expertly manipulated and caressed my body. I blush and gasp at the memory and press my thighs together. He

looks up, his unfathomable gray eyes shining, his expression unreadable.

'Sorry,' I whisper. 'I didn't mean to disturb you.'

A frown crosses his face.

'Sure, I should tell you that,' he whispers. He finishes playing and puts his hands on his legs.

I now notice he's wearing pajama pants. He runs his fingers through his hair and stands up.

His pants hang down from his hips, that way... oh my there. My mouth goes dry as he casually walks around the piano towards me. He has broad shoulders, narrow hips, and his abdominal muscles ripple as he walks. He is truly magnificent.

'You should be in bed,' he warns.

'It was a beautiful play. Bach?'

'Transcribed by Bach, but originally an oboe concerto by Alessandro Marcello.'

'It was exquisite, but very sad, such a melancholy melody.'

His lips curl up in a half-smile.

'Bed,' he orders. 'You will be exhausted in the morning.'

'I woke up and you weren't there.'

'I have trouble sleeping and I'm not used to sleeping with anyone,' he whispers. I can't understand his mood. He seems a little disheartened, but it's hard to tell in the dark. Maybe that was the tone of the song he was playing. He puts his arm around me and slowly leads me back to the bedroom.

'How long have you been playing? You play beautifully.'

'Since I was six years old.'

'Oh.' Grayson as a six-year-old boy... my mind conjures up an image of a handsome little boy with brassy hair with gray eyes and my heart melts - a moppet-haired child who enjoys incredibly sad music.

'How are you?' he asks when we're back in the room. He lights night light.

'I'm fine.'

We both look at the bed at the same time. There is blood on the sheets - proof of my lost virginity I am only 16. I blush, embarrassed, pulling the quilt tight around me.

'Well, that'll give Mrs. Jones something to think about,' Grayson mutters as he stands in front of me. He puts his hand under my chin and tilts my head back, staring at me. His eyes are intense as he examines my face. I realize that I have never seen his bare chest before. Instinctively, I reach out to run my fingers through the fistful of dark hair on his chest to see what it feels like. Immediately, he pulls back out of my reach.

~*~

'Go to bed,' he said sharply. 'I'll come and sleep with you.' Her voice softens.

I drop my hand and frown. I don't think I ever touched his chest. He opens a dresser, pulls out a t-shirt, and quickly puts it on.

'Bed,' he orders again. I climb back onto the bed, trying not to think of the blood.

He climbs up beside me and pulls me into his embrace, wrapping his arms around me so that I turn away from him. He gently kisses my hair and takes a deep breath.

'Sleep, sweet Naddalin,' he whispers, and I close my eyes, but I can't help but feel a residual melancholy due to the music or her behavior. Grayson Maury has a sad side.

Light fills the room, making me go from deep sleep to awake. I stretch and open my eyes. It's a beautiful morning in May, New York at my feet. Wow, what a view. Beside me, Grayson Maury is sleeping soundly. Wow, what a view. I'm surprised he's still in bed. He faces me and I have an unprecedented opportunity to study him. Her pretty face looks younger, relaxed in sleep. Her sculpted, pouty lips are slightly parted, and shy, clean hair is a glorious mess. How could someone look so good-looking and still be legal? I remember his upstairs bedroom... maybe it's not legal. I shake my head, so much to think about. It's tempting to reach out and touch it, but as a little child, he's so adorable when he's sleeping. I don't have to worry about what I

say, what he says, what plans he has, especially his plans for me.

I could watch it all day, but I have needs - bathroom needs. As I slide out of bed, I find his white shirt on the floor and pull it on. I walk through a door, thinking it might be the bathroom, but I'm in a huge walk-in closet as big as my bedroom. Lines and lines of expensive suits, shirts, shoes, and ties. How can anyone need so many clothes that I disapprove of? Maury's wardrobe probably rivals that. Maury! Oh no. I haven't thought about her all evening. I was supposed to text him. Shit. I'm going to be in trouble. I briefly wonder how she gets along with Jack.

Back in the bedroom, Grayson is still sleeping. I try the other door. It's the bathroom, and it's bigger than my bedroom. Why does a man need so much space? Two sinks, I note with irony. Since he is not sleeping with anyone, one of them cannot have been used.

I look at myself in the gigantic mirror above the sinks. Do I look different? I feel different. I feel a little sore, if I'm being honest, and my muscles - damn it, it's like I've never exercised in my life. You

don't do any exercise in your life, my subconscious has awakened.

She looks at me with pursed lips, patting her foot. So you just slept with him, you gave him your virginity, a man who doesn't love you. He has some very weird ideas about you, wants to make you some kind of kinky sex slave.

ARE YOU CRAZY She yells at me.

I grimace, looking at myself in the mirror. I'll have to deal with all of this. Honestly, I want to fall in love with a man who is beyond handsome, richer than Croesus, and who has a red room of pain waiting for me. I'm shivering. I am bewildered and confused. My hair is as usual finicky. Just kissed hair doesn't suit me. I try to tidy up the chaos with my fingers but fail miserably and give up - maybe I'll find some hair ties in my purse.

I'm starving. I go back to the bedroom. Sleeping Beauty is still sleeping, so I leave him and head for the kitchen.

Oh no... Maury. I left my purse in Grayson's office. I go get him and grab my cell phone. Three texts.

~ RU OK Naddalin ~

~ Where RU Naddalin ~

~ Damn Naddalin ~

I'm calling Maury. When she doesn't respond, I leave her a creepy message to tell her that I'm alive and haven't succumbed to Bluebeard, well not in the sense that she would be worried - or maybe I would. have done. Oh, this is so confusing. I have to try to categorize and analyze my feelings for Grayson Maury. It is an impossible task. I shake my head in defeat. I need time alone, far from here to think.

I find two hair ties at the same time in my bag and quickly tie my hair into pigtails. Yes! The more girly I look, maybe the safer I will be from Bluebeard. I take my iPod out of the bag and plug in my headphones. There is nothing like music for cooking. I slip it into Grayson's breast pocket, pull it up hard, and start dancing.

Damn, I'm hungry.

I am intimidated by his cooking. It's so sleek and modern and none of the closets have handles. It takes a few seconds for me to figure out that I have to push the cupboard doors open to open them. Maybe

I should make breakfast for Grayson. He was having an omelet the other day… uh, yesterday at the Heathman. Hell, so much has happened since then. I check the fridge, where there are plenty of eggs, and decide I want some pancakes and bacon. I started to make dough while dancing in the kitchen.

Being busy is good. This leaves a little time to think, but not too deeply. Music ringing in my ears also helps to avoid deep thinking. I came here to spend the night in Grayson's bed, Maury, and I got that done, although he didn't leave anyone in his bed. I smile, mission accomplished. Highlights. I smile. Big, big time, and I are distracted by the memory of last night. His words, his body, his antics… I close my eyes as my body buzzes at the memory, and my muscles contract deliciously deep in my stomach. My subconscious is watching me… damn - no love - she screams at me like a harpy. I don't know, but deep down I know she's right. I shake my head to focus on the task at hand.

There is a range at the cutting edge of technology. I think I got it. I need a place to keep the pancakes warm, and I'm starting with the bacon. Amy Studt sings in

the ear of the misfits. This song meant so much to me, it's because I'm a misfit. I have never moved anywhere and now… I have an indecent proposal to consider from King Misfit himself. Why is it so Nature or Nurture He's so alien to all I know?

I put the bacon under the grill and while cooking I whisk eggs. I turn around and Grayson is sitting on one of the stools in the breakfast bar, leaning against it, his face propped up by his crossed hands. He still wears the t-shirt he slept in. The just-kissed hair fits her, as does her designer stubble. He looks both amused and bewildered.

I freeze, blush, then pull myself together and pull the headphones out of my ears, knees weak at the sight of it.

'Hello, Miss Black. You are very energetic this morning,' he said dryly.

'I slept well,' I stammered. His lips try to hide his smile.

'I can't imagine why.' He stops and frowns. 'Me too, after coming back to bed.'

'You are hungry?'

'Very,' he says with an intense gaze, and I don't think he's referring to the food.

'Pancakes, bacon and eggs?'

'Great.'

'I don't know where you keep your placemats.' I shrug, desperately trying not to sound upset.

'I'll do that. You're cooking. Would you like me to put some music on so you can continue your… uh… dancing?'

I look at my fingers, knowing that I am going to be a chip.

'Please don't stop at my account. It's a lot of fun.' Its tone is that of ironic amusement.

I tighten my lips. funny eh My subconscious laughed at me.

I turn around and continue to whisk the eggs, probably beating them a little harder than necessary.

In a moment he's beside me. He gently pulls my pigtail.

'I love it,' he whispers. 'They won't protect you.' Hmm, Blue Beard...

'How would you like your eggs?' I ask sharply. He smiles.

'Well whipped and beaten,' he smiles.

I return to the task at hand, trying to hide my smile. It's hard to stay angry. Especially when he's so playful in an unusual way. He opens a drawer and takes out two black slate placemats for the breakfast bar. I pour the egg mixture into a saucepan, take out the bacon, turn it over, and put it back under the grill.

When I turn around, there's orange juice on the table and he's making coffee.

'Would you like some tea?'

'Yes, please. If you have any.'

I find a few plates and place them on the hot plate of the stove. Grayson reaches into a cupboard and pulls out some Twinings English Breakfast tea. I tighten my lips.

'A little early, isn't it?'

'Are you, I'm not sure we've concluded anything yet, Miss Black,' he whispers.

What does he mean by that Our negotiations Our, uh... relationship... anyway, He's still so cryptic. I serve breakfast on heated plates and place them on the placemats. I hunt in the refrigerator and find maple syrup.

I look at Grayson and he waits for me to sit down.

'Miss Black'. He waves to one of the bar stools.

'Mr. Maury. I nod my head. I go upstairs and wince slightly as I sit down.

'How sore are you?' he asks, sitting down. His dark gray eyes.

I rinse. Why does he ask such personal questions?

'Well, to be honest, I have nothing to compare to that,' I told him. 'Did you want to offer your commiserations?' I ask too nicely. I think he's trying to stifle a smile, but I can't be sure.

'No. I wondered if we should continue your basic training.'

'Oh.' I watch him dumbfounded as I stop breathing and everything inside me tightens. Ooh... that's so sweet. I suppress my moan.

'Eat, Naddalin. My appetite became uncertain again... more... more sex... yes, please.

'It's delicious, by the way.' He smiles at me.

I tried an omelet fork but can barely taste it. Basic training! I want to kiss your mouth. Is this part of the basic training?

'Stop biting your lip. It's very distracting, and I know you're not wearing anything under my shirt, which makes it even more distracting,' he growls.

I dipped my tea bag in the small pot provided by Grayson. My mind is in a whirlwind.

'What kind of basic training did you have in mind?' I ask, my voice slightly too loud, betraying my desire to appear as

natural, selfless, and calm as possible with my hormones wreaking havoc on my body.

'Well, since you are hurting, I thought we could stick to speaking skills.'

I choke on my tea and look at him, my eyes were wide and gaping. He patted me gently on the back and passed me some orange juice. I can't say what he's thinking.

'That's if you want to stay,' he adds. I watch him, trying to regain my balance. His expression is illegible. It is so frustrating.

'I would like to stay for today. If it's okay. I have to work tomorrow.

'What time do you have to be at work tomorrow?

'New.'

'I'll put you to work at nine tomorrow.'

I frown. Does he want me to stay another night?

'I'm going to have to go home tonight - I need clean clothes.'

'We can get some here for you.'

I have no money to spend on clothes. His hand raises and he grabs my chin, pulling it so that my lip is free from the grip of my teeth. I don't even know I bit my lip.

'What is that?' he asks.

'I need to be home tonight.'

His mouth is a hard line.

'Alright, tonight,' he nods. 'Now have your breakfast.'

My thoughts and my stomach are in turmoil. My appetite is gone. I watch my half-eaten breakfast. I'm just not hungry.

'Eat, Naddalin. You didn't eat last night.

'I'm really not hungry,' I whisper.

His eyes narrow.

'I would really like you to finish your breakfast.'

'What's with you and the food?' I let it slip. His forehead crumples.

'I told you, I have problems with wasted food. Eat,' he snaps. His eyes are dark, painful.

Holy Crap. What is it about? I take my fork and eat slowly, trying to chew.

I have to remember not to put that much on my plate if he's going to be weird about the food. His expression softens as I carefully work my way into my breakfast. I see he is cleaning his plate. He waits for me to finish, then he clears my plate.

'You cooked, I will clarify.'

'It's very democratic.'

'Yes.' He frowns. 'It's not my usual style. After doing this, we'll take a bath.'

'Oh okay.' Oh my... I much prefer to take a shower. My cell phone rings, interrupting my reverie. It's Maury.

'Hi.' I wander towards the glass doors of the balcoPittsburgh, far from him.

'Naddalin, why didn't you text last night?' She is angry.

'I'm sorry, I was overwhelmed by events.'

'You're okay?'

'Yes I'm fine.'

'Do you have?' She's looking for information. I roll my eyes at the expectation of his voice.

'Maury, I don't want to talk on the phone.' Grayson looks at me.

'You did... I can say it.'

How can she tell she's bluffing, and I can't talk about it. I signed a damn deal.

'Maury, please.

'How were you doing?'

'I told you I'm fine.'

'Was he nice?

'Maury, please! I can't hide my exasperation.

'Naddalin, don't hold me up, I've been waiting for this day for almost four years.'

'I'll see you tonight.' I'm hanging up.

It will be a difficult square to circle. She's so stubborn, and she wants to know - in detail, and I can't tell her because I signed one - what it was called NDA.

She will panic and rightly so. I need a plan. I return to watch Grayson move, Billie, fully around his kitchen.

'Does the NDA cover everything?' I ask shyly.

'Why?' he turns and looks at me while putting the Twinings away. I rinse.

'Well, I have a few questions, you know, about sex.' I look at my fingers. 'And I'd like to ask Maury.

'You can ask me.'

'Grayson, with all due respect. My voice fades. I can't ask you. I'm going to have your biased, kinky as hell, warped worldview regarding sex. I want an unbiased opinion. 'It's just a matter of mechanics. I won't mention the Red Room of Pain.'

He raises his eyebrows.

'The red paint room is all about pleasure, Naddalin. Believe me, 'he says.

'Besides,' his tone is harsher. 'Your roommate is making the two-backed beast with my brother. I would really prefer you didn't.'

'Does your family know about your… uh predilection?'

'No. It's none of their business.' He walks towards me until he is standing in front of me.

'What do you want to know?' he asks and raising his hand, his fingers along my cheek to my chin, tilting his head back so he can look directly into my eyes. I squirm inside. I can't lie to this man.

'Nothing specific yet,' I whisper.

'Well, we can start with - how was last night for you?' Her eyes burn, filled with curiosity. He can't wait to know.

~*~

Wow.

'Good,' I whisper.

Her lips lift slightly.

'Me too,' he whispers. 'I've never had vanilla sex before. There's a lot to say

about it. But then, maybe it's because it's with you.' He runs his thumb over my lower lip.

I breathe in sharply. Vanilla sex?

'Come on, let's take a bath. He leans in and kisses me. My heart leaps and longs for pools very low... there.

The bath is a white stone, deep, egg-shaped, very designed. Grayson bends down and fills it from the tap on the tiled wall. He pours expensive bath oil into the water. It foams as the bath fills up and smells of sweet and sensual jasmine. He stands up and looks at me, his eyes dark, then peels off his shirt and throws it on the floor.

'Miss Black'. He holds out his hand.

I stand on the doorstep, wide-eyed and suspicious, my arms wrapped around me. I move forward while surreptitiously admiring his physique. It is just delicious. My subconscious passed out and passed out somewhere behind my head. I take his hand and he invites me into the bath while I am still wearing his shirt. I do what I'm told. I'm going to have to get used to it if I'm

going to accept him for his outrageous offer... yes! The water is very hot.

'Turn around, face me,' he orders, his voice soft. I do what I suggest. He looks at me intently.

'I know that lip is delicious, I can attest to that, but are you going to stop biting it?' he said through clenched teeth. 'You chew it makes me want to fuck you, and you're in pain, okay?'

I gasp, automatically unlocking my lip, shocked.

'Yeah,' he challenges. 'I have the picture.' He looks at me. I nod frantically. I had no idea I could affect him like that.

'Good.' He reaches out and pulls my iPod out of the chest pocket and puts it near the sink.

'Water and iPods - not a smart combination,' he mumbles. He bends down, grabs the hem of my white shirt, lifts it over my head, and throws it to the floor.

He pulls back to look at me. I'm naked for heaven's sake. I blush from crimson and gaze at my hands, at the base of my stomach, and desperately want to

disappear into the hot water and suds, but I know he won't.

'Hey,' he summons me. I look at him and his head is tilted to the side. 'Naddalin, you are a very beautiful woman, the whole package. Don't hang your head like you're ashamed. You don't have to be ashamed, and it's a real joy to stay here and watch you. He takes my chin in his hand and tilts my head to reach his eyes. They are soft and warm, even heated. Oh my. He is so close. I could just reach out and touch him.

'You can sit down now.' He stops my scattered thoughts and I rush into the warm, welcoming water. Ooh... it stings. This takes me by surprise, but it smells like heaven too, and the initial tingling pain quickly goes away. I lie back and briefly close my eyes, relaxing in the soothing heat. When I open them, he looks at me.

'Why don't you join me?' I ask, bravely I think - my hoarse voice.

'I think I will. Come on,' he orders.

He undresses his pajama pants and climbs up behind me. The water rises as he sits up and pulls me against his chest. He

places his long legs on mine, his knees bent and his ankles level with mine, and he spreads his feet, opening my legs. I gasp in surprise. His nose is in my hair and he is breathing deeply.

'You smell so good, Naddalin.

A tremor runs through my whole body. I'm naked, in a bath with Grayson Maury.

He is naked. If someone had told me I would do this when I woke up in their hotel suite yesterday, I wouldn't have believed them.

He takes a bottle of shower gel from the built-in shelf next to the tub and throws it into his hand. He rubs his hands together, creating a soft, lathering lather, and he closes his hands around my neck and begins rubbing the soap into my neck and shoulders, massaging firmly with his long, powerful fingers. I moan. His hands-on me makes me feel good.

'You like this?' I hear his smile.

'Hmm.'

He goes down my arms, then under them to my armpits, washing gently. I'm so

glad Maury insisted that I shave. Her hands slide over my breasts, and I inhale sharply as her fingers encircle them and begin to gently knead, taking no prisoners. My body instinctively tilts, pushing my breasts into her hands. My nipples are tender. Very tender, no doubt from his less than delicate treatment last night. He doesn't linger for long and slides his hands over my stomach and stomach. My breathing is increasing and my heart is racing. His growing erection pressed against my butt. It's so exciting to know that it's my body that makes it feel that way. Ha... not your mind. My subconscious sneers. I shake off this unwanted thought.

He stops and grabs a washcloth as I gasp against him, wanting... to need. My hands are resting on her firm, muscular thighs. Squirting more soap on the washcloth, he bends down and washes between my legs. I hold my breath. His fingers skillfully stimulate me through the fabric, it's heavenly, and my hips start to move at their own pace, pushing against his hand. As the sensations take hold, I tilt my head back, my eyes rolling to the back of my head, my mouth released, and I moan. The pressure builds slowly, inexorably in me... oh there.

'Feel it, baby,' Grayson whispers in my ear and very gently rubs my earlobe with his teeth. 'Feel it for me.' My legs are pinned by hers to the side of the tub, holding me captive, giving her easy access to this most private part of me.

'Oh... please,' I whisper. I try to stiffen my legs as my body stiffens. I am under the sexual influence of this man and he will not let me move.

'I think you're pretty clean now,' he whispers and stops. What! No! No! No!

My breathing is irregular.

'Why are you stopping?' I gasp.

'Because I have other plans for you Naddalin.'

What... oh my... but... I was... that's not fair.

'Turn around. I need to wash myself too,' he whispers.

Oh! Turning to face him, I'm shocked to find that he has his erection firmly in his hands.

My mouth opens.

'I want you to get to know me well, in terms of first name if you will, with my favorite and Dearest part of my body.' I am very attached to it.

It's so big and growing. His erection is above the waterline, the water lapping over his hips. I look at him and find myself face to face with his nasty smile. He appreciates my stunned expression. I realize that I am watching. I swallow. It was in me! It doesn't seem possible. He wants me to touch him. Hmm... okay, bring him.

I smile at her and grab the shower gel, throwing the soap on my hand. I do what he did, lathering the soap into my hands until they are frothy. I don't take my eyes off him. My lips are parted to accommodate my breathing... very deliberately, I gently bite my lower lip, then run my tongue over it, tracing where my teeth were. Her eyes are serious and dark, and they widen as my tongue brushes my lower lip. I reach out and place one of my hands around him, mirroring the way he holds himself. Her eyes close briefly. Wow... feels a lot firmer than I expected. I squeeze, and he places his hand on mine. 'Like that,' he whispers, and he moves his hand up and down with a firm grip around my fingers,

and my fingers tighten around him. He closes his eyes again and his breath hangs in his throat. When he opens them again, his gaze is a burning gray fade. 'That's right baby.'

He lets go of my hand, letting me continue on my own, and closes his eyes as I move up and down his length. He flexes his hips slightly in my hand and by reflex, I squeeze him tighter. A low growl escapes from deep in his throat. Fuck my mouth... hmm. I remember putting his thumb in my mouth and asking me to suck hard. Her mouth opens slightly as her breathing increases. I lean forward, while his eyes are closed, and place my lips around him and suck tentatively, running my tongue over the tip.

'Whoa... Naddalin.' Her eyes open and I suck harder.

Hmm... it's soft and hard at the same time, like velvet-covered steel, and surprisingly tasty - salty and smooth.

'Damn it,' he moans and closes his eyes again.

On the way down, I push it into my mouth. He moaned again. Ha! My inner

goddess is delighted. I can do it. I can fuck it with my mouth. I wrap my tongue around the tip again, and he flexes his hips. Her eyes are open now, swelling with warmth. His teeth are clenched as he flexes again, and I push him deeper into my mouth, supporting myself on his thighs. I feel his legs tighten under my hands. He reaches out and grabs my pigtails and starts to move.

'Oh... baby... that feels good,' he whispers. I suck harder, running my tongue over the head of his impressive erection. Curling my teeth behind my lips, I tighten my mouth around him. His breath hisses between his teeth and he moans.

'Jesus. How far can you go?' He whispers.

Hmm... I pull it deeper into my mouth so I can feel it deep in my throat and then forward again. My tongue swirls towards the end. This is my very own Grayson Maury-flavored popsicle. I suck harder and harder, pushing him deeper and deeper, spinning my tongue more and more. Hmm... I had no idea that giving pleasure could be such arousal, watching him twist subtly with carnal lust. My inner

goddess does the merengue with a few movements of salsa.

'Naddalin, I'm going to come into your mouth,' her panting tone is a warning. 'If you don't want it, stop now.' He flexes his hips again, his eyes wide, suspicious, and filled with a salacious need - need me. Need my mouth... oh la la!

Holy shit. His hands are gripping my hair. I can do it. I push even harder and, in a moment of extraordinary confidence, I bar my teeth. This tilts it over the edge.

He screams and freezes, and I can feel a hot, salty liquid oozing down my throat. I swallow quickly. Ugh... I'm not sure. But one look at him, and he fell apart in the tub because of me, and I didn't care. I sit down and watch him, a triumphant, jubilant smile drawing to the corner of my lips. His breathing is irregular. Opening his eyes, he looks at me. 'Don't you gag reflex?' he asks, astonished. 'Damn, Naddalin… it was… good, really good, unexpected though.' He frowns. 'You know, you never cease to amaze me.'

I smile and consciously bite my lip. He looks at me speculatively.

'Have you ever done this?'

'No.' And I can't help the little tinge of pride in my denial.

'Good,' he said complacently and, I think, relieved. 'Yet another first, Miss Black.'

He looks at me with appreciation. 'Well you get an A in speaking skills. Come on, let's go to bed, I owe you an orgasm.'

Orgasm! Another!

Quickly, he climbs out of the tub, giving me my first full glimpse of the divinely formed Adonis, ie Grayson Maury. My inner goddess has stopped dancing and is watching too, her mouth open and drooling slightly. His tame erection, but still substantial... wow. He wraps a small towel around his waist, covering most of the essentials, and hands me a larger, fluffy white towel. Coming out of the bath, I take his outstretched hand. He wraps me in the towel, hugs me, and kisses me hard, pushing his tongue into my mouth.

I can't wait to reach out and kiss him... touch him... but he has my arms trapped in the towel. I am soon lost in his kiss. He cradles my head, his tongue

explores my mouth, and I feel like he's expressing gratitude - maybe - for my first blowjob.

He pulls away, his hands on either side of my face, staring intently into my eyes. He looks lost.

'Say yes,' he whispers fervently.

I frown, not understanding.

'To what?'

'Yes to our arrangement. Be mine. Please, Naddalin,' he whispered, underlining the last word and my name, pleading. He kisses me again, softly, passionately, before pulling back and staring at me, blinking lightly. He takes my hand and leads me back to his room, leaving me tottering, so I obediently follow him. Stunned. He wants this.

In his bedroom, he looks at me as we stand by his bed.

'Believe me?' he suddenly asks. I nod, my eyes wide with the sudden realization that I trust him. What is he going to do to me now? An electric shiver runs through me.

'Good girl,' he breathes, his thumb brushing my bottom lip. He walks away into his closet and returns with a silver-Maury woven silk tie.

'Knit your hands together in front of you,' he orders, pulling the napkin away from me and throwing it on the floor.

I do as he asks, and he ties my wrists with his tie, knotting it tightly. Her eyes shine with wild excitement. He pulls on the binding. It's safe. Some Scouts had to learn these knots. My pulse went through the roof, my heart pounding a wild tattoo. He runs his fingers over my braids.

'You look so young with it,' he whispers and walks forward. Instinctively, I step back until I feel the bed against the back of my knees. He drops his towel, but I can't take my eyes off his face. Her expression is fiery, full of desire.

'Oh, Naddalin, what should I do to you?' he whispers as he lowered me onto the bed, lying next to me, and raising his hands above my head.

'Keep your hands here, don't move them, get it?' His eyes burn in mine and I

am breathless from their intensity. This is not a man I want to meet... ever.

'Answer me,' he asks, his voice soft.

'I won't move my hands.' I am breathless.

'Good girl,' he whispers and deliberately licks her lips slowly. I am mesmerized by his tongue slowly passing over his upper lip. He looks me in the eye, looks at me, appreciates. He leans in and plants a quick, chaste kiss on my lips.

'I'm going to kiss you all over, Miss Black,' he said softly, and he takes my chin, pushing it up to give it access to my throat. Her lips slide down my throat, kissing, sucking, and nibbling, down to the little dip at the base of my neck. My body jumps to attention... everywhere. My recent bathing experience has made my skin hypersensitive. My hot blood is pooling in my stomach, between my legs, right there. I moan.

I want to touch it. I move my hands and rather awkwardly since I'm restrained, I can feel her hair. He stops kissing me and looks at me, shaking his head from side to

side, twisting as he does. He grabs my hands and places them over my head again.

'Don't move your hands, or we have to start all over again,' he scolds me softly.

Oh, he's so teasing.

'I want to touch you.' My voice is all panting and uncontrollable.

'I know,' he whispers. 'Keep your hands above your head,' he orders in a loud voice.

He takes my chin again and starts kissing my throat like before. Oh... he's so frustrating.

His hands roam my body and breasts as he reaches the hollow at the base of my neck with his lips. He swirls the tip of his nose around him then begins a very leisurely cruise with his mouth, heading south, following the path of his hands, down my breastbone to my breasts. Everyone is kissed and bitten gently and my nipples are tenderly sucked.

~*~

Holy shit.

My hips start to sway and move on their own, squealing to the rhythm of her mouth over me, and I desperately try to remember to keep my hands above my head.

'Stay still,' he warns, his warm breath against my skin. Reaching my navel, he plunges his tongue inside, then gently rubs my stomach with his teeth. My body tilts off the bed 'Hmm. You are so nice, Miss Black.' His nose slides along the line between my stomach and my pubic hair, biting me gently, teasing me with his tongue. Straightening up abruptly, he kneels at my feet, grabbing both my ankles and spreading my legs wide.

Holy shit. He grabs my left foot, bends my knee, and brings my foot to his mouth.

Watching and assessing my every reaction, he tenderly kisses each of my toes and then gently bites each one on the pads. When it reaches my little toe, it bites harder and I convulse, moaning. He slides his tongue over my instep - and I can't look at him anymore.

It's too erotic. I will burn. I close my eyes and try to absorb and I do it by all

the sensations it creates. He kisses my ankle and trails kisses from my calf to my knee, stopping just above. He then begins on my right foot, repeating the entire process, seductive and mind-blowing.

'Oh, please,' I moan as he bites my little toe, the action echoing deep in my stomach.

'All the good things, Miss Black,' he hisses.

This time it doesn't stop at my knee, it continues inside my thigh, spreading my thighs apart as he does. And I know what he's going to do, and part of me wants to push him away because I'm mortified and embarrassed. He's going to kiss me over there! I know that. And part of me prides itself on the anticipation. He turns to my other knee and kisses me along my thigh, kissing, licking, sucking, then he's between my legs, running his nose up and down my cock, very soft, very soft. I am writing to you... oh my.

He stops, waiting for me to calm down. I do and lift my head to look at him, my mouth open as my pounding heart struggles to come out.

'Do you know how intoxicating you feel, Miss Black?' he whispers, and keeping his eyes on mine, he digs his nose into my pubic hair and inhales.

I blush scarlet all over, feeling weak, and instantly close my eyes. I can't watch him do this!

He blows gently over the entire length of my penis. Oh fuck...

'I like this.' It gently pulls on my pubic hair. 'Maybe we'll keep this.'

'Oh... please,' I'm begging you.

'Hmm, I like it when you beg me, Naddalin.'

I moan.

'Tit for tat is not my usual style, Miss Black,' he whispers, blowing me gently up and down. 'But I liked you today, and you should be rewarded.' I hear the wicked smile in her voice, and as my body sings from her words, her tongue slowly begins to circle my clit as her hands hold my thighs together.

'Aargh! I moan as my body tilts and convulses at the touch of his tongue.

He swirls his tongue around, over and over again, continuing the torture. I lose all sense of myself, every atom of my being is focused hard on this small and powerful powerhouse at the top of my thighs. My legs stiffen, and he slides his finger inside me, and I hear his growl.

'Oh, baby. I love that you are so wet for me.'

He moves his finger in a wide circle, stretching me out, pulling me over, his tongue reflecting his actions, in circles and circles, I moan. It's too much... My body craves relief, and I can't deny it anymore. I let go, losing all convincing thoughts as my orgasm gripped me, twisting my insides over and over again. Holy shit. I scream, and the world plunges in and disappears from view as the force of my orgasm nullifies everything.

I am panting and faintly hear the tearing of the foil. Very slowly, he enters me and begins to move. Oh my. The sensation is painful and soft, bold and gentle at the same time.

'How is it?' he breathes.

'Good. Good,' I breathe. And it starts to move, fast, strong and big, sinking into me over and over again, relentless, pushing and pushing me until I'm close to the edge again. I moan.

'Come for me, baby.' His voice is harsh, harsh, raw in my ear, and I explode around him as he quickly hammers inside me.

'Thanks fucking,' he whispers, and he pushes hard again and moans as he climaxes, pressing himself against me. Then he stops moving, his body rigid.

Collapsing on top of me, I feel his full weight push me into the mattress. I run my tied hands over his neck and squeeze it as best I can. I knew then that I would do anything for this man. I am his. The wonder he presented to me is beyond anything I could have imagined. And he wants to go further, so much further, to a place that I cannot even, in my innocence, imagine. Oh... what to do?

He leans on his elbows and looks at me, his eyes deep gray.

'See how good we are together,' he whispers. 'If you give yourself to me, it will

be so much better. Trust me, Naddalin, I can take you to places you don't even know exist.'

His words echo my thoughts. He strokes his nose against mine. I'm still in shock at my extraordinary physical reaction to him, and I gaze blankly at him, catching a cohesive thought.

Suddenly, we both become aware of the voices in the hallway outside his bedroom door. It takes a while to process what I can hear.

'But if he's still in bed, then he must be sick. He's never in bed yet. Grayson never sleeps.

'Mrs. Maury, please.

'Stephen. You cannot keep me from my son.'

'Mrs. Maury, he's not alone.

'What do you mean he's not alone?'

'He has someone with him.'

'Oh…' Even I can hear the disbelief in his voice.

Grayson blinks quickly, staring at me, eyes wide in horror full of humor.

'Shit! It's my mother.'

He comes out of me suddenly. I wince. He sits on the bed and throws the used condom into a trash can.

'Come on, we have to get dressed - that's if you want to meet my mom.' He smiles, jumps out of bed, and puts on his jeans, no underwear! I find it difficult to sit down because I am still tied up.

'Grayson - I can't move.'

His smile widens, and bending down, he undoes the tie. The woven pattern made an indented pattern around my wrists. It's... sexy. He looks at me. He is amused, his eyes dance with joy. He kisses my forehead quickly and beams at me.

'Another first,' he admits, but I have no idea what he's talking about.

'I don't have clean clothes here.' I am suddenly panicked and considering what I have just been through, I find the panic overwhelming. His mother! Holy shit. I have no clean clothes and she practically

fell on us red-handed. 'Maybe I should stay here.

'Oh, no, no,' Grayson threatens. 'You can wear something to me.' He puts on a white t-shirt and runs his hand through his just kissed hair. Despite my anxiety, I lose my train of thought. Will I ever get used to looking at this handsome man?

Her beauty is derailed.

'Naddalin, you could carry a bag and you would look lovely.' Please don't worry.

I would like you to meet my mother. Dress. I'm just gonna go and calm her down. Her mouth presses into a hard line. 'I'll be waiting for you in this room in five minutes or else I'll come and drag you out of here myself in whatever you're wearing.' My t-shirts are in this drawer.

My shirts are in the closet. Help me. He looks at me speculatively for a moment, then leaves the room.

Holy shit. Grayson's mother. It's so much more than what I bargained for. Maybe meeting her will help put together a small part of the puzzle. It might help me understand why Grayson is the way he is...

Suddenly I want to meet her. I take my shirt off the floor and am happy to find that it survived the night well with almost no wrinkles. find my blue bra under the bed and get dressed quickly. But if there's one thing I hate, it's not wearing clean panties. I dig into Grayson's dresser and fall on his underpants.

After putting on a pair of tight gray Calvin Kleins, I pull on my jeans and Converse.

Grabbing my jacket, I rush into the bathroom and look at my overly bright eyes, flushed face - and hair! Holy shit... just fucked braids don't suit me either. I look in the cabinet for a brush and find a comb. We will have to do it. A ponytail is the only answer. I despair of my clothes. Maybe I should take Grayson on his clothing offer.

My subconscious tightens its lips and covers up the word 'ho'. I do not know. Pounding in my jacket, glad the cuffs were covering the revealing patterns of his tie, I take one last anxious look at myself in the mirror. This will have to do. I make my way into the main living room.

'She's there.' Grayson stands from where he is lounging on the couch.

Her expression is warm and grateful. The sandy-haired woman next to him turns and looks at me, a megawatt smile. She gets up too. She is immaculately dressed in a camel-colored fine knit sweater dress with matching shoes. She looks neat, elegant, beautiful, and inside I'm a little dying, knowing that I look so messy.

'Mother, this is Naddalin Black. Naddalin, this is Billie Trevelyan-Maury.

Dr. Trevelyan-Maury holds out his hand to me. T... for Trevelyan?

'What a pleasure to meet you,' she whispers. If I'm not mistaken, there is wonder and maybe stunned relief in her voice and a warm glow in her hazel eyes. I grab her hand and can't help but smile, returning her warmth.

'Dr Trevelyan-Maury,' I whispered.

'Call me Billie,' she smiles, and Grayson frowns. 'I am usually Dr. Trevelyan, and Mrs. Maury is my mother-in-law. She winks. 'So how did you meet?' She looks at Grayson questioningly, unable to hide her curiosity.

'Naddalin interviewed me for the student newspaper at OVHS because I'm graduating there this week.'

Double shit. I had forgotten that.

'So you graduated this week?' Billie asks.

'Yes.'

My cell phone starts ringing. Maury, I bet.

'Sorry.' It's in the kitchen. I walk around and lean over the breakfast counter, not checking the number.

'Maury.

'Dios Mio! Naddalin! Holy shit, it's Sam. He looks desperate. 'Where are you, I tried to contact you. I need to see you, to apologize for my behavior on Friday. Why haven't you returned my calls?'

'Look Sam, now is not a good time.' I glance anxiously at Grayson who is watching me intently, his face impassive as he whispers something to his mother. I turn my back to him.

'Where are you, Maury is so evasive,' he moaned.

'I'm in New York.'

'What are you doing in New York? Are you with him?'

'Sam, I'll call you later. I can not talk to you right now. I'm hanging up.

I also casually walk over to Grayson and his mother. Billie is in full swing.

'... And Jack called to say that you were there - I haven't seen you in two weeks, honey.'

'Has he done it now?' Grayson whispers, looking at me, his expression unreadable.

'I thought we could have lunch together, but I can see you have other plans, and I don't want to interrupt your day.' She picks up her long cream coat and turns to him, offering him her cheek. He kisses her briefly, gently. She doesn't touch him.

'I have to get Naddalin back to Pittsburgh.'

'Of course, honey. Naddalin, it's been such a pleasure. Hope we meet again.'

She holds out her hand to me, her eyes shining and we shake.

Stephen appears from... where?

'Mrs. Maury?' He asks.

'Thanks, Stephen.' He accompanies her out of the room and through the double doors of the foyer. Stephen was here the whole time, how long has he been here, where has he been?

Grayson looks at me.

'So the photographer called?'

Shit.

'Yes.'

'What did he want?

'Just to apologize, you know - for Friday.'

Grayson narrows his eyes.

'I see,' he said simply.

Stephen reappears.

'Mr. Maury, there is a problem with the cargo from Darfur.'

Grayson nods sharply at her.

'Fake and Gay back to Boeing Field?'

'Yes sir.'

Stephen nods to me.

'Miss Black'.

I smile back at him shyly, and he turns and leaves.

'Does he live here Stephen?'

'Yes.' His tone is cut off. What's his problem?

Grayson walks over to the kitchen and picks up his BlackBerry, going through some emails, I guess. His mouth presses into a hard line, and he makes a call.

'Ros, what's the problem?' he slams. He listens to me, looking at me, gray eyes speculative, as I stand in the middle of the huge room wondering what to do with myself, feeling extraordinarily embarrassed and out of place.

'I'm not putting any crew in jeopardy. No, cancel... we'll drop the air instead... Good.'

He hangs up. The heat in his eyes is gone. He looks surly, and with a glance at me, he walks over to his office and comes back a moment later.

'That's the contract. Read it, and we'll discuss it next weekend. May I suggest you do some research, so you know what it is.' He pauses. 'That's if you agree, and I really hope you do.' He adds, his tone softer, anxious.

'Research?

'You will be amazed at what you can find on the Internet,' he whispers.

The Internet! I don't have access to a computer, only Maury's laptop, and I couldn't use Eastwood's, surely not for that kind of 'research'?

'What is that?' he asks, tilting his head to one side.

'I don't have a computer. I'll see if I can use Maury's laptop.

He hands me a kraft paper envelope.

'I'm sure I can… uh, lend you one.' Grab your things, we'll head back to

Pittsburgh and have lunch on the way. I need to get dressed.

'I'm just going to make a call,' I whisper. I just wanna hear Maury's voice. He frowns.

'The photograph?' His jaw tightens and his eyes burn. I blink at him. 'I don't like to share, Miss Black. Remember this. His calm, chilling tone is a warning, and with a long, cold look at me, he walks back to the bedroom.

Holy shit.

I just wanted to call Maury, I wanted to call her, but her sudden distance left me paralyzed. What happened to the generous, relaxed, and smiling man who made love to me not half an hour ago?

'Ready?' Grayson asks as we stand by the double doors of the foyer.

I nod uncertainty. He resumed his distant, polite, and tense personality, his mask put back in place and exposed. He is carrying a leather messenger bag. Why does he need this? Maybe he stays in Pittsburgh, and then I remember graduating. Oh yes... he will be there on Thursday.

He wears a black leather jacket. He sure doesn't look like the multi-multi-million-ary billionaire, anything, in those clothes. He looks like a boy on the wrong side of the runways, maybe an ill-bred rock star or a runway model. I sigh inwardly, wishing I had a tenth of his balance. He's so calm and controlled. I frown, remembering his anger over Sam… well, he seems to be.

Stephen hovers in the background

'Tomorrow then,' he says to Stephen, who nods

'Yes sir. What car do you take, sir?

He looks at me briefly.

'The R8'.

'Have a nice trip, Mr. Maury. Miss Black.' Stephen looks at me kindly, although there may be a hint of pity hidden deep in his eyes.

He no doubt thinks that I have succumbed to Mr. Maury's questionable sexual habits. Not yet, just her exceptional sex habits, or maybe sex is like that for everyone. I frown at the thought. I have no comparison and I cannot ask Maury. This is something I'm going to have to discuss with

Grayson. It's perfectly natural for me to talk to someone - and I can't talk to them if they're so open one minute and so unemotional the next.

Stephen opens the door for us and lets us through. Grayson calls the elevator. 'What's the matter, Naddalin?' he asks. How does he know that I'm chewing on something in my mind? He reaches out and pulls my chin.

'Stop biting your lip, or I'll fuck you in the elevator, and I don't care who comes in with us.'

I blush, but there is a hint of a smile around her lips, finally, her mood seems to change. 'Grayson, I have a problem.'

'Oh?' I have his full attention.

The elevator arrives. We walk in and Grayson presses the button marked G.

'Well,' I rinse off. How do you say that 'I need to talk to Maury. I have so manyquestions about sex, and you're too involved. If you want me to do all of these things, how do I know -?' I stop, struggling to find the right words. 'I just don't have a warrant.'

He rolls his eyes at me.

'Talk to him if you have to.' He looks exasperated. 'Make sure she doesn't mention anything to Jack.'

I bristle at his insinuation. Maury is not like that.

'She wouldn't do that, and I won't tell you anything that she tells me about Jack - if she said anything to me,' I add quickly.

'Well the difference is, I don't want to know about her sex life,' Grayson whispers dryly. 'Jack is a curious bastard. But only about what we have done so far, 'he warns.

'She would probably have my balls if she knew what I wanted to do to you,' he adds so softly that I'm not sure I'm supposed to hear him.

'Alright,' I gladly accept, smiling at him, relieved. I don't want to dwell on the thought of Maury with Grayson's balls.

His lip comes up to me and he shakes his head.

'The sooner- I get your submission the better, and we can stop this,' he whispers.

'Stop all what?'

'You defying me.' He leans down and takes my chin and plants a quick, soft kiss on my lips as the elevator doors open. He grabs my hand and leads me into the underground garage.

Me defying him... how?

Next to the elevator, I can see the black Audi 4x4, but it's the sleek, sporty black number that flips open and lights up when it brings the keychain to it. It's one of those cars that should have a very leggy blonde, wearing nothing but a belt, sprawled over the hood.

'Nice car,' I whisper dryly.

He looks up and smiles.

'I know,' he said, and for a split second, the young and carefree Grayson is back. It warms my heart. He's so excited. The boys and their toys. I roll my eyes at him but can't seem to stifle my smile. He opens the door for me and I go upstairs. Whoa... it's low. He circles the car with

easy Billie and elegantly folds his long frame beside me. How does he do that?

'So, what kind of car is this?'

'It's an Audi R8 Spyder. It's a beautiful day, we can get off the roof. There's a baseball cap in there. Actually, there should be two.' He points to the glove box. 'And sunglasses if you want them.'

He turns on the ignition and the engine roars behind us. He places his bag in the space behind our seats, presses a button and the roof slowly tilts. With the push of a switch, Bruce Springsteen surrounds us.

'I must love Bruce,' he smiles at me and pulls the car out of the parking space, and walks up the steep ramp where we stop for the barrier.

Then we are in the bright May morning in New York. I dig in the glove box and retrieve the baseball caps. Seamen. He likes baseball, I pass him a cap and he puts it on. I put my ponytail behind mine and pulled the visor down.

People are watching us as we drive through the streets. For a moment, I think it's his… and then a very paranoid part

thinks everyone is looking at me because they've known what I've been doing for twelve hours, but eventually I realize it's the car. Grayson seems unconscious, lost in thought.

The traffic is light and we are soon on I-5 heading south, the wind sweeping our heads. Bruce sings about the fire and his desire. What aptitude. I blush as I listen to the words. Grayson looks at me. He's got his Ray-Bans, so I don't know what he's thinking. His mouth twists slightly, and he reaches out and places his hand on my knee, squeezing it gently. My breathing is blocked.

'Hunger?' He asks.

Not for the food.

'Not particularly.'

Her mouth tightens in that hard line.

~*~

'You have to eat, Naddalin,' he chides. 'I know a great place near Olympia. We'll stop there.' He squeezes my knee again, then puts his hand back on the wheel, putting his foot on the accelerator. I

am pressed against the back of my seat. Boy, this car can move.

The restaurant is small and intimate, a wooden chalet in the middle of a forest. The decor is rustic: random chairs and tables with gingham tablecloths, wildflowers in small vases. Cuisine Sauvage boasts above the door.

'I haven't been here for a while. We have no choice - they cook whatever they've caught or picked up.' He raises his eyebrows in mock horror, and I have to laugh. The waitress takes our drink order. She blushes when she sees Grayson, avoiding eye contact with him, hiding under her long blonde bangs. She loves him! It's not just me!

'Two glasses of Pinot Grigio,' Grayson said in a commanding voice. I tighten my lips, exasperated.

'What?' He slams.

'I wanted a Coke Light,' I whisper.

His gray eyes narrow and he shakes his head.

'Pinot Grigio is a decent wine, it will go well with the meal, whatever we get.'

He said patiently.

'What do we get?'

'Yes.' He smiles, his dazzling head tilted to one side, and my stomach jumps over my spleen. I can't help but send her glorious smile back.

'My mother liked you,' he said dryly.

'Really?' His words make me blush with pleasure.

'Oh yeah. She always thought I was gay.'

My mouth is open and I remember this question... from the interview. Oh no.

'Why did she think you were gay?' I whisper.

'Because she's never seen me with a girl.'

'Oh... not even one of the fifteen?'

He smiles.

'You remember that. No, none of the fifteen.'

'Oh.'

'You know, Naddalin, it's been a weekend of premieres for me too,' he said softly.

'He has?'

'I have never slept with anyone, never had sex in my bed, never piloted a girl at Fake and Gay, never introduced a woman to my mother. What are you doing to me? His eyes burn, their intensity takes my breath away.

The waitress arrives with our glasses of wine, and I immediately take a sip. Does it open up or is it just making an informal observation?

'I really enjoyed this weekend,' I whisper. He narrows his eyes at me again.

'Stop biting that lip,' he growls. 'Me too,' he adds.

'What is vanilla sex?' I ask if there is anything to distract me from the intense, hot, and sexy gaze he gives me. He's laughing.

'Just simple sex, Naddalin. No toys, no added extras.' He shrugs his shoulders. 'You know... well actually no, but that's what it means.'

'Oh.' I thought it was melted chocolate brownie sex we had, with a cherry on top. But hey, what do I know?

The waitress brings us soup. We both look at him rather dubiously.

'Nettle soup', informs the waitress before turning around and returning to the kitchen. I don't think she likes being ignored by Grayson. I take a temporary taste. This is delicious.

Grayson and I look at each other in relief. I laugh and he tilts his head to one side.

'It's a beautiful sound,' he whispers.

'Why haven't you had vanilla sex before, have you always done… uh, what have you done?' I ask, intrigued.

He slowly nods his head.

'Kind of.' His voice is suspicious. He frowns for a moment and seems to be

engaged in some sort of internal struggle. Then he looks up, a decision is made. 'A friend of my mother's seduced me when I was fifteen.'

'Oh.' Holy shit it's young!

'She had very particular tastes. I was her submissive for six years.' He shrugs his shoulders.

'Oh.' My brain froze, dumbfounded in inactivity by this admission.

'So, I know what that entails, Naddalin. His eyes shine with insight.

I watch him, unable to articulate anything - even my subconscious is silent.

'I didn't really have an ordinary introduction to sex.'

Curiosity comes into play.

'So you never dated anyone in college?'

'No.' He shakes his head to emphasize this point.

The waitress takes our plates, interrupting us for a moment.

'Why?' I ask when she left.

He smiles sardonically...

'Do you really want to know?'

'Yes.'

'I didn't want to. She was all I wanted, what I needed. And besides, she would have beaten me the shit.' He smiles affectionately at the memory.

Oh, that's way too much information - but I want more.

'So, if she was a friend of your mother's, how old was she?'

He smiles.

'Old enough to know better.

'Do you still see her?'

'Yes.'

'Are you... uh...?' I rinse.

'No.' He shakes his head and smiles indulgently at me. 'She is a very good friend.'

'Oh. Does your mother know that?'

He gives me a not stupid look.

'Of course not.'

The waitress returns with deer, but my appetite is gone. What a revelation.

Grayson the submissive... Holy shit. I take a big slug of Pinot Grigio - he's right, of course, it's delicious. Damn, all of these revelations, there is so much to think about. I need time to process this, when I'm alone, not when I'm distracted by his presence. He's so overwhelming, so Alpha Male, and now he's thrown that bomb into the equation. He knows what it is.

'But couldn't that have been full time?' I'm confused.

'Well, it was, even though I didn't see her all the time. It was hard. After all, I was still in school and then in university. Eat, Naddalin.

'I'm not hungry, Grayson. I am in shock at your disclosure.

His expression hardened.

'Eat,' he said softly, too softly.

I am watching him. This man - sexually abused as a teenager - his tone is so threatening.

'Give me a moment,' I whisper. He blinks several times.

'Alright,' he whispers and continues with his meal.

This is what it will be like if I sign it by ordering myself. I frown. Do I want this?

Grabbing my knife and fork, I temporarily cut off the deer. It's delicious.

'Is this what our mistake will look like... relationship?' I whisper. 'You order me?' I can't bring myself to watch it.

'Yes,' he whispers.

'I see.'

'And besides, you'll want me to do it,' he adds, his voice low.

I sincerely doubt it. I slice another piece of deer, holding it against my mouth.

'It's a big step,' I whisper and eat.

'It is.' He briefly closes his eyes. When he opens them, they are wide and serious.

'Naddalin, you have to go with your gut. Do your research, read the contract - I'm happy to discuss any aspect. I'll be in Pittsburgh until Friday if you want to talk about it first. His words come to me hastily. 'Call me - maybe we can have dinner - say, Wednesday, I want it to work. I've never wanted anything as much as I want it to work.'

Her burning sincerity, her desire, is reflected in her eyes. This is basically what I do not understand. Why me Why not one of the fifteen Oh no... Will it be me - a number?

Sixteen among many others?

'What happened to the fifteen?' I let it slip.

He raises his eyebrows in surprise, then seems resigned, shaking his head.

'Various things, but it boils down to,' he stops, struggling to find the words I mean.

'Incompatibility.' He shrugs his shoulders.

'And do you think I could be compatible with you?'

'Yes.'

'So, you don't see any of them arnymore?'

'No, Naddalin, I am not. I am monogamous in my relationships.'

Oh… this is news.

'I see.'

'Do the research, Naddalin.'

I put down my knife and fork. I can't eat anymore.

'Is that it, is that all you're going to eat?'

I agree. He looks at me but chooses not to say anything. I breathe a little sigh of relief.

My stomach is spinning with all this new information, and I feel a little dizzy from the wine. I watch him devour everything on his plate. He eats like a

horse. He has to work to stay in such great shape. The memory of the way her pajamas hung from her hips spontaneously comes to mind. The image is distracting. I squirm uncomfortably. He looks at me and I blush.

'I would give anything to know what you're thinking right now,' he whispers.

I blush again.

He gives me a nasty smile.

'I can guess,' he teases softly.

'I'm glad you can't read my mind.'

'Your mind, no Naddalin, but your body - which I must have known well since yesterday.' Her voice is suggestive. How does he switch from one mood to another so quickly? He's so mercurial... It's hard to follow.

He waves to the waitress and asks for the check. Once paid, he gets up and extends his hand.

'Come.' Taking my hand in his, he leads me back to the car. This contact, flesh against flesh, is what is so unexpected, normal, intimate to him. I cannot reconcile

this ordinary, tender gesture with what he wants to do in this room... The red chamber of pain.

We are quiet on the road from Olympia to York, both lost in our thoughts.

When he parks in front of my apartment, it's five in the evening. The lights are on - Maury is home. Packaging, no doubt, unless Jack was still around. He cuts the engine and I realize I'm going to have to leave him.

'Do you want to come in?' I ask. I don't want him to leave. I want to extend our time together.

'No, I have work to do,' he said simply, looking at me, his expression unfathomable.

I watch my hands as I tie my fingers together. Suddenly, I feel moved.

He is leaving. Reaching out, he takes one of my hands and slowly brings it back to his mouth, tenderly kissing the back of my hand, a gesture so sweet and old-fashioned. My heart leaps in my mouth.

'Thanks for this weekend, Naddalin. It was... the best. On Wednesday,

I will pick you up from work, wherever you are from? he said softly.

'Wednesday,' I whisper.

He kisses my hand again and puts it back on my lap. He comes out, comes to my side, and opens the passenger door. Why do I suddenly feel helpless? A lump forming in my throat? I must not let him see me like this. Fixing a smile on my face, I climb out of the car and up the path, knowing that I have to face Maury, dreading facing Maury. I turn around and look at him halfway. Chin up Black, I scold myself.

'Oh... by the way, I'm wearing your underwear.' I give him a small smile and pull up the waistband of my underwear so he can see. Grayson's mouth opens, shocked. What a great reaction. My mood immediately changes, and I sashay around the house, part of me wanting to jump and kick in the air. YES! My inner goddess is delighted.

Maury is in the living room packing his books in crates.

'You're back. Where's Grayson How are you?' Her voice is feverish,

anxious, and she leaps up to me, grabbing my shoulders, scrutinizing my face before I even say hello.

Damn... I have to deal with Maury's persistence and tenacity, and I have a signed legal document saying I cannot speak. It is not a healthy mix.

'Well, how was it? She smiles mischievously.

I can't help but smile at his worry and burning curiosity, but suddenly I feel shy.

I'm blushing. It was very private. All. See and find out what Grayson has to hide. But I have to give her a few details because she won't leave me alone until I do.

'It was good, Maury. Alright, I think,' I said softly, trying to hide my embarrassed and revealing smile.

'You think?'

'I have nothing to compare, have I?' I shrug my shoulders to apologize.

'Did he make you come?'

Holy shit. She is so direct. I turn scarlet.

'Yes,' I mumble, exasperated.

Maury pulls me onto the couch and we sit down. She shakes my hands.

'That is good.' Maury looks at me incredulously. 'It was your first time. Wow, Grayson must really know what he's doing.'

Oh Murr, if you only knew.

'My first time was horrible,' she continues, making a sad, comical face.

'Oh?' It interests me, something she has never disclosed before.

'Yes, Steve Paton. High school, jock with no cock.' She shudders. 'He was tough. I wasn't ready. We were both drunk. You know - a typical teenage disaster after prom. Ugh - it took me months before I decided to try again. And not with him, the insane wonder. I was too young. You were right to wait. '

'Maury, that sounds horrible.

Maury looks nostalgic.

'Yeah, it took almost a year to have my first orgasm through penetrating sex, and here you are... the first time?

I nod shyly. My inner goddess sits in the lotus position and looks serene except for the sly, self-congratulatory smile on her face.

'I'm glad you lost it to someone who knows his ass off his elbow.' She winks at me. 'So when do you see him again?'

'Wednesday. We have dinner.'

'So you still love her?'

'Yes. But I don't know about... the future.'

'Why?'

'He's complicated, Maury. You know - he lives in a very different world than mine.'

Excellent excuse. Believable too. Much better than - he's got a red room of pain, and he wants to make me his sex slave.

'Oh please don't let it be about the money, Naddalin. Jack said it was very unusual for Grayson to date anyone.

'Is he?' My voice goes up several octaves.

Too obvious, Black! My subconscious gazes at me, wagging its long, skinny finger, then turns into the scales of justice to remind me that it might sue if I reveal too much.

Ha... what is he going to do - take all my money, have to remind Google 'penalties for breaching a nondisclosure agreement while I do the rest of my 'research '. It is as if I had been given a school assignment. Maybe I will be noted. I blush, remembering my A for this morning's bath experience.

'Naddalin, what is this?'

'I just remember something Grayson said.'

'You look different,' Maury said fondly.'

'I feel different. Sore,' I confess.

'Sore?'

'A little.' I rinse.

'Me too. Men, 'she said with mock disgust. 'They are animals.' We both laugh.

'You are hurt?' I exclaim.

'Yes... overuse.'

I laugh.

'Tell me about Jack the superuser,' I ask when I stop laughing. Oh, I feel myself relaxing for the first time since standing in line at the bar... before the phone call that started it all - when I admired Mr. Maury from afar. Good days without complications.

Maury blushed. Oh my... Maury Agnes Smith does all Naddalin Rose Black on me. She gives me a dewy look. I've never seen her react that way to a man before.

My jaw drops to the ground. Where's Maury, what did you do with her?

'Oh, Naddalin,' she gushed. 'He's so... Everything. And when we... oh... really good.' She can barely string together a sentence. She is in such pain.

'I think you are trying to tell me that you like him.'

She nods, smiling like crazy.

'And I see him on Saturday. He's going to help us move.' She shakes hands, jumps off the couch, and spins to the

window. Moving. Damn - I forgot all that, even with the packing boxes around us.

'It helps him,' I said with appreciation. I can also know him. Maybe he can give me a glimpse of his strange and disturbing brother.

'So what did you do last night?' I ask. She tilted her head towards me and raised her eyebrows in a what-do-you-think-stupid look.

'Pretty much what you did, even though we had dinner first.' She smiles at me. 'Are you really okay? You look a little overwhelmed.'

'I feel overwhelmed. Grayson is very intense.'

'Yeah, I could see how he could be. But was he good to you?'

'Yes,' I reassure her. 'I'm really hungry, should I cook?'

She nods and takes two more books to wrap.

'What do you want to do with the fourteen thousand pounds?' She asks.

'I'll give them back to him.'

'Really?'

'It's a completely overdone gift. I can't accept it, especially now.' I smile at Murray and she nods.

'I understand. A few letters came for you, and Sam called every hour. He looked desperate.

'I'll call him,' I whisper evasively. If I tell Maury about Sam, she'll take him for breakfast. I retrieve the letters from the dining table and open them.

'Hey, I have interviews! Next week in New York for internships!'

'For which publishing house?'

'For both of them!'

'I told you your GPA would open doors, Naddalin.'

Maury, of course, already has an internship set up at the New York Times. Her father knows someone, who knows someone.

'What does Jack think of you leaving?' I ask.

Maury walks into the kitchen, and for the first time tonight, she's inconsolable.

'He understands. Part of me doesn't want to go, but it's tempting to stay in the sun for a few weeks. Plus, mom hangs in there, thinking this will be our last real family vacation before Paul and I weren't taking the lead. in the world of paid work. '

I have never left the continental United States. Maury leaves for Barbados with his parents and his brother Paul for two whole weeks. I'll be Mauryless in our new apartment. It will be weird. Paul has traveled the world since graduating last year. I wonder briefly if I'll see him before they go on vacation. He's a really lovely guy. The phone rings, knocking me out of my reverie.

'It will be Sam.'

I sigh. I know I need to talk to him. I pick up the phone.

'Hi.'

'Naddalin, you're back! Sam shouts her relief at me.

'Obviously.' Nadal Cash flows from my voice and I look up at the phone.

He is silent for a while.

'Can I see you I’m sorry Friday night, I was drunk... and yo... Will Naddalin -.

Please forgive me. '

'Of course I forgive you Sam. Don't do it again. You know I don't feel like that about you.'

He sighs heavily, sadly.

'I know, Naddalin. I just thought if I kissed you, it might change how you feel.'

'Sam, I love you very much, you mean so much to me. You are like the brother I never had.

This is not going to change. You know. I hate to let it go, but it's the truth.

'So are you with him now?' His tone is full of disdain.

'Sam, I'm not with anyone.

'But you spent the night with him.'

'It's none of your business!'

'Is it the money?'

'Sam! How dare you!' I cry, staggered by his audacity.

'Naddalin,' he moans and apologizes simultaneously. I can't handle his little jealousy anymore. I know he's hurt, but my plate is overflowing with Grayson Maury.

'Maybe we can have some coffee or something tomorrow. I'll call you.' I am accommodating.

He is my friend and I love him very much. But at the moment, I don't need that.

'Tomorrow then. Will you call?' The hope in his voice twists my heart.

'Yes... good night, Sam.' I hang up, not waiting for his answer.

'What was it all about?' Maury asks his hands on his hips. I decided that honesty is the policy. She looks more intractable than ever.

'He gave me a pass on Friday.'

'Sam and Grayson Murray Nadalin, your pheromones have to work overtime. What was the stupid idiot thinking? She

shakes her head in disgust and returns to packing cases.

Forty-five minutes later, we hang up our packaging for the house specialty, my lasagna.

Maury opens a bottle of wine and we sit among the boxes to eat, drink cheap red wine and watch crappy TV. This is the norm. It's so grounded and welcome after the last forty-eight hours of... madness. I ate my first meal without haste, boredom, and peace at that time. What is it about him and the food? Maury cleans the dishes, and I finish tidying up the living room. We end up with the sofa, the television, and the dining table. What more would we need? We just have the kitchen and our bedrooms to tidy up, and we have the rest of the week. Result!

The phone rings again. It's Jack. Maury winks at me and jumps into her room like she's fourteen. I know she should write her Valedictorian speech, but it seems Jack is more important. What about the menWhat is Merry - what makes them distracting, all-consuming, and irresistible grab another cork of wine.

I flip through the TV channels, but deep down I know I'm procrastinating. Burning a bright red hole in the side of my purse is this contract. Do I have the strength and the means to read it tonight?

I put my head in my hands. Sam and Grayson, both want something from me.

Sam is easy to manage. But Grayson... Grayson takes a whole different league of manipulation, of understanding. Part of me wants to run and hide. What will I do? Her burning gray eyes and that intense, burning gaze come to my mind, and my body tightens at the thought. I gasp. He's not even there and I'm excited. I can't remember his sweet jokes this morning at breakfast, his joy in cheering me up with the helicopter ride, playing the piano for him - the sweet soulful music and so sad.

She's such a complicated person. And now I have an idea of why. A young man deprived of his teenage years, sexually abused by an evil figure of Mrs. MLF stifler’s mom... no wonder he's old before his time. My heart filled with sadness at the thought of what he had to go through. I'm too naive to know exactly what, but the

research should shed some light. But do I want to know? Do I want to explore this world I know nothing about?

It is such a big step

If I hadn't met him, I would still be kind and blissfully oblivious. My mind drifts to last night, and this morning... and the incredible, sensual sexuality that I experienced. Do I wanna say goodbye to this? No! Scream my subconscious... my inner goddess nods in a quiet, zen chord with her.

Maury returns to the living room, smiling ear to ear. Maybe she's in love - my mouth is speechless. She never behaved like that.

'Naddalin, I'm going to bed. I am quite tired.

'Me too, Maury.

She hugs me.

'I'm glad you're back in one piece. There's something about Grayson,' she adds calmly, apologizing. I give her a reassuring little smile - while thinking... How the hell does she know? This is what will make her a great journalist, her flawless intuition.

Picking up my purse, I walk quietly to my room. I am weary of all our carnal efforts of the last day and of the complete and utter dilemma that I am faced with. I sit on my bed and gently pull the manila envelope out of the bag, turning it over and over in my hands. Do I want to know the extent of Grayson's depravity? It is so intimidating. I take a deep breath and, heart in my throat, open the envelope.

There are several papers inside the envelope. I fish for them, my heart still pounding, and I sit on my bed and start reading.

CONTRACT:

Concluded this day_____ of 2009 ('the start date') BETWEEN Mr. Grayson Maury of 501 Escala, New York, 1947

('The Dominant)

MISS Naddalin Black of 1114 SW Green Street, Apartment 7, Haven Heights, York, WA 98888

('The Submissive)

THE PARTIES AGREE AS FOLLOWS:

❖ The following are the terms of a binding contract between the Dominant and the Submitter.

BASIC CONDITIONS

1. The fundamental objective of this contract is to allow the Submissive to explore her sensuality and her limits in complete safety while respecting and respecting her needs, her limits, and her well-being.

2. The Dominant and the Submissive agree and acknowledge that everything that happens under this contract will be consensual, confidential, and subject to the agreed limits and security procedures outlined in this contract. Additional safety limits and procedures may be agreed upon in writing.

3. The Dominant and the Submissive each warrant that they are free from any sexual, serious, infectious, or life-threatening illnesses, including, but not limited to HIV, herpes, and hepatitis. If during the Term (as defined below) or an extended term of this contract, one of the parties should be diagnosed or become aware of such a disease, it undertakes to

inform the other immediately and in any event before any form of physical contact between the parties.

4. Compliance with the above warranties, agreements, and covenants (as well as any additional safety limits and procedures agreed upon under clause 3 above) are fundamental to this contract. any breach will render it null with immediate effect and each party agrees to be fully responsible to the other for the consequences of any breach.

5. Everything in this contract should be read and interpreted in light of the fundamental purpose and fundamental conditions set out in clauses 2-5 above.

ROLES:

1. The Dominant must take responsibility for the welfare and proper training, guidance, and discipline of the Submissive. It will decide on the nature of such training, advice, and discipline as well as the time and place of its administration, subject to any agreed conditions, limitations, and security procedures set out in this contract or further agreed upon thereafter. under clause 3 above.

2. If at any time the Dominant does not comply with the conditions,

limitations, and security procedures agreed in this contract or further agreed under clause 3 above, the Bidder is entitled to terminate this contract immediately. and leave the Dominant's service without notice.

3. Subject to this reservation and clauses 2 to 5 above, the Submitter must serve and obey the Dominant in all things. Subject to any agreed conditions, limitations, and safety procedures outlined in this contract or further agreed under clause 3 above, it will provide the Dominant with any pleasure he may need without question or hesitation and will accept without question or hesitation his training, advice, and discipline in any form whatsoever.

START AND DURATION

1. The Dominant and the Subject enter into this contract on the Start Date with full knowledge of its nature and undertake to comply with its conditions without exception.

2. This contract will be in effect for three calendar months from the start date ('the term'.) At the expiration of the term, the parties will discuss whether this contract and the arrangements they have

made under this contract are satisfactory and whether the needs of each party have been met. Each of the parties may propose the extension of this contract subject to adjustments to its conditions or to the arrangements it will have taken under it. In the absence of agreement on such an extension, this contract ends and both parties are free to resume their lives separately.

AVAILABILITY:

1. The Submissive will make herself available to the Dominant from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon each week during the Term at times to be specified by the Dominant ('the allotted times.) The additional time allocated may be mutually agreed upon on an ad hoc basis.

2. The Dominant reserves the right to remove the Bidder from its service at any time and for any reason. The Submissive may request her release at any time, such request being granted at the discretion of the Dominant subject only to the rights of the Submissive under clauses 2-5 and 8 above.

LOCATION:

1. The Submissive will make herself available during Allocated Hours and agreed with overtime at locations to be determined by the Dominant. The Dominant will ensure that all travel costs incurred by the Bidder for this purpose are borne by the Dominant.

SERVICES:

1. The following service arrangements have been discussed and agreed upon and will be adhered to by both parties during the term. Both parties recognize that certain matters may arise which are not covered by the terms of this contract or the provisions of the service, or that certain matters may be renegotiated. In such circumstances, other clauses may be proposed by amendment. any other clause or modification must be accepted, documented, and signed by both parties and is subject to the fundamental conditions set out in clauses 2-5 above.

DOMINANT:

1. The Dominant must make the health and safety of the Submissive a priority at all times. The Dominant shall not at any time require, request, authorize or require the Submitter to participate at the

hands of the Dominant in the activities detailed in Annex 2 or any act that either party deems dangerous. The Dominant will not take or allow any action to be taken that could cause serious injury or risk to the life of the Submissive. The other sub-clauses of this clause 15 should be read subject to this reservation and the basic matters agreed upon in clauses 2-5 above.

2. The Dominant accepts the Submissive as his own, to possess, control, dominate and discipline for the duration. The Dominant may use the Submissive's body at any time during the Allotted Hours or at another agreed time in any manner, it deems appropriate, sexually or otherwise.

3. The Dominant will provide the Submitter with all necessary training and guidance on how to properly serve the Dominant.

4. The Dominant must maintain a stable and secure environment in which the Submissive can perform her duties in the service of the Dominant.

5. The Dominant may discipline the Submissive as necessary to ensure that the Submissive fully appreciates his role of enslavement to the Dominant and to discourage unacceptable conduct. The Dominant may whip, spank, whip or bodily

punish the Submissive as he sees fit, for purposes of discipline, for personal pleasure, or for another reason which he is not obligated to provide.

6. In the formation and administration of the discipline, the Dominant will ensure that no permanent marks are made on the body of the Submissive nor any injuries sustained which may require medical attention.

7. In the formation and administration of discipline, the Dominant shall ensure that the discipline and the instruments used for discipline are safe, should not be used in such a way as to cause serious harm, and should not in any way exceed the limits. defined and detailed in this contract.

8. In the event of illness or injury, the Dominant will take care of the Submissive, ensuring her health and safety, encouraging and, if necessary, ordering medical treatment when deemed necessary by the Dominant.

9. The Dominant should maintain his health and seek medical attention if necessary to maintain a safe environment.

10. The Dominant must not lend his Submissive to another Dominant.

11. The Dominant may restrain, handcuff or bind the Submissive at any time during the Allotted Times or at any additional time agreed upon for any reason and extended periods, with due regard to the health and safety of the Submissive.

12. The Dominant will ensure that all equipment used for training and discipline purposes is maintained at all times in a clean, hygienic, and safe condition.

SUBMITTED:

1. The Submissive accepts the Dominant as her master, with the understanding that she is now owned by the Dominant, to be treated as the Dominant wishes during the Term in general but specifically during the Allotted Time and another agreed-upon allotted time.

2. The Bidder must obey the rules ('the Rules') set out in Annex 1 to this Agreement.

3. The Submissive will serve the Dominant as she sees fit and will endeavor to please the Dominant at all times to the best of her ability.

4. The Submissive will take all necessary measures to maintain her good health and will seek or consult a physician

whenever necessary, keeping the Dominant informed at all times of any health problem that may arise.

5. The Submissive will ensure that she obtains oral contraception and will ensure that she takes it as and when prescribed to avoid pregnancy.

6. The Submissive will unquestionably accept any disciplinary action deemed necessary by the Dominant and will at all times remember her status and role concerning the Dominant.

7. The Submissive must not touch or indulge herself sexually without the permission of the Dominant.

8. The Submissive will submit to any sexual activity requested by the Dominant and will do so without hesitation or argument.

9. The Submissive will accept whipping, flogging, spanking, caning, paddling, or any other discipline that the Dominant should decide to administer, without hesitation, investigation, or complaint.

10. The Submissive should not look directly into the eyes of the Dominant except when specifically instructed to do so. The Submissive will keep her eyes lowered

and maintain a calm and respectful demeanor in the presence of the Dominant.

11. The Submissive will always respectfully conduct herself towards the Dominant and will only address him as Sir, Mr. Maury, or any other title the Dominant may order.

12. The Submissive will not touch the Dominant without his express permission to do so.

ACTIVITIES:

1. The Bidder must not participate in activities or sexual acts that either party deems dangerous or in activities detailed in Annex 2.

2. The Dominant and the Tenderer have discussed the activities set out in Annex 3 and recorded in Annex 3 their agreement to them.

SAVE:

1. The Dominant and the Submitted recognize that the Dominant may make demands on the Submitted which cannot be met without suffering physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or other harm at the time the demands are made to the Submitted. In such circumstances related to this, the Bidder may use a security word

('The Safeword (s)'.) Two Safewords will be invoked depending on the severity of the requests.

2. The 'Yellow' Safeword will be used to draw the Dominant's attention to the fact that the Submissive is near her endurance limit.

3. The 'Red' Safeword will be used to draw the attention of the Dominant to the fact that the Submissive cannot tolerate any further requests. When this word is said, the Dominant's action will cease completely with immediate effect.

CONCLUSION:

1. We, the undersigned, have read and fully understand the provisions of this contract.

2. We freely accept the terms of this contract and have acknowledged it by our signatures below

The Dominant: Grayson Maury

Dated

The Submissive: Naddalin Black

Dated

ANNEX 1

RULES:

Obedience:

The Submissive will immediately obey all instructions given by the Dominant without hesitation or reservation and in a speedy manner. The Submissive will accept any sexual activity deemed suitable and pleasurable by the Dominant, except for activities which are described within strict limits (Annex 2.) She will do so with eagerness and without hesitation.

Sleep:

The Submissive will ensure that she achieves a minimum of eight hours of sleep per night when not with the Dominant.

Food:

The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and well-being from a list of prescribed foods (Appendix 4.) The Submissive will not snack between meals, except for fruit.

Clothing:

During the term, the Submissive will wear clothing only approved by the Dominant.

The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for the Submissive, which the Submissive will use. The Dominant will accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis. If the Dominant so requires, the Submissive shall wear for the duration of the adornments that the Dominant requires, in the presence of the Dominant and at another time that the Dominant deems appropriate.

Exercise:

The Dominant will provide the Submitter with a personal trainer four times per week in one-hour sessions at times to be mutually agreed upon between the personal trainer and the Submitter. The personal trainer will report to the Dominant on the progress of the Submissive.

Personal hygiene / Beauty:

The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or shaved at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon chosen by the Dominant at times decided by the Dominant, and undergo any treatment the Dominant deems appropriate. All costs will be borne by the Dominant.

Personal security: the submissive does not drink excessively, smoke, take recreational drugs, or put herself in unnecessary danger.

Personal qualities:

The Submissive will not enter into a sexual relationship with anyone other than the Dominant. The Submissive will conduct herself at all times respectfully and modestly. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection of the Dominant.

It will be held responsible for any mischief, wrongdoing, and misconduct committed outside the presence of the Dominant.

Failure to comply with any of the above conditions will result in immediate

punishment, the nature of which will be determined by the Dominant.

APPENDIX 2

Strict limits

No acts involving fire games.

No acts involving urination or defecation and their products No acts involving needles, knives, cuts, piercings, or blood No acts involving gynecological medical instruments

Maybe acts involving children or animals.

No acts that will leave a permanent mark on the skin.

No act involving the control of breathing.

No activity involving direct contact of electric current (alternating or direct), fire, or flame with the body.

APPENDIX 3

Soft limits:

To be discussed and agreed between the two parties:

Which of the following sexual acts are acceptable to the Bidder?

- Solo Masturbation
- Blowjob
- Cunnilingus
- Reports
- Deep throat
- Swallowing
- Vaginal fisting intercourse
- Cum eating
- Pussy eating
- Anal fisting/finger and licking
- Anal play of all types

Is swallowing the semen acceptable to the submissive?

Is the use of sex toys acceptable for the submissive?

- Vibrator
- Dildos
- Butt Plugs
- Other
- Is bondage acceptable for the submissive?
- Hands in front of
- hands behind the back
- Legs
- Knees
- Elbows

- ❖ Ankle Wrists
- ❖ Spreader bars
- ❖ Tied to the furniture
- ❖ Eyes blinded
- ❖ Penis
- ❖ Bondage with rope
- ❖ Bondage with tape
- ❖ Bondage with leather cuffs
- ❖ Suspension
- ❖ Bondage with metal handcuffs/restraints

What are the general attitude of the Submissive about receiving pain where 1 is love intensely and 5 means hate intensely: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

How much pain does the submissive want to receive Where 1 is zero and 5 is severe: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

Which of the types of pain/punishment/discipline is acceptable to the Submitter?

1. Spanking
2. Paddle
3. Whipping
4. Caning
5. Bite
6. Nipple clamps
7. Genital clamps

8. Ice cream
9. Hot wax
10. Other types/methods of pain

Holy Fuck. I can't even bring myself to consider the food list. I swallow hard, my mouth dry, and read it again.

My head is buzzing. How do I come to terms with all of this and it is to my advantage to explore my sensuality, my limits - safely - oh please! I laugh angrily. Serve and obey in all things. All the things! I shake my head in disbelief. Doesn’t the wedding ceremony Pittsburgh use these words… obey me. Do couples still say that only three months, that's why there have been so many, he doesn't keep them long or they have enough after three months, every weekend is too much. I'll never see Maury or the friends I could make in my new job - as long as I have one. Maybe I should have a weekend a month to myself. Maybe when I'm on my period, it feels... handy.

He's my master! To be treated as you wish! Holy shit.

I shudder at the thought of being whipped or whipped. Spanking probably wouldn't be that bad, humiliating though. And tied up. Well, he tied my hands

together. It was… well it was hot, really hot, so maybe it won't be that bad. He won't lend me to another Dominant - yes, he won't. It would be unacceptable. Why do I even think about it?

I can't look him in the eye. Is this weird? The only way for me to have a chance to see what he's thinking. Who I'm kidding, I never know what he's thinking, but I like to look him in the eye. He has beautiful eyes - captivating, intelligent, deep and gloomy, gloomy with dominant secrets. I remember his burning smokey gaze and pressing my thighs together, squirming.

-And-

I can't touch it. Well, no surprise there. And those silly rules… No, no, I can't do that. I put my head in my hands. This is no way to have a relationship. I need to sleep. I'm broken. All the physical shenanigans I've been involved in over the past twenty-four hours have been, frankly, exhausting. And mentally… oh man, that's so much to consider. As Sam would say, real shit. Maybe in the morning, it might not read like a bad joke.

I jostle and change quickly. Maybe I should borrow Maury's pink flannel pajamas. I want something cuddly and reassuring around me. I head for the bathroom with my t-shirt and nightgowns on and brush my teeth.

I look at myself in the bathroom mirror. You can't seriously consider this...

My subconscious seems sane and rational, not his usual sneaky self. My inner goddess is jumping up and down, clapping her hands like a five-year-old. Please let's do this… otherwise we'll end up alone with lots of cats and your classic novels to keep you company in Pittsburgh.

The only man I've ever been drawn to, and he comes with a bloody contract, a whip, and a whole world of problems. At least I made it this weekend. My inner goddess stops jumping and smiles serenely. Oh yes... she said, giving me a smug nod.

I blush at the memory of her hands and her mouth on me, her body in mine. As I close my eyes, I feel the delicious familiar pull of my muscles from deep to deep. I want to do this over and over again. Maybe if I just signed up for sex... it would go with that I guess not.

Am I submissive? Maybe I will meet this way. Maybe I misled him during the interview. I'm shy, yes... but submissive, I let Maury pester me - is that the same? And those soft limits, jeez. My mind is breathtaking, but I am reassured that they are ready to discuss it.

I go back to my room. It's too much to think about. I need a clear head - a fresh morning approach to the problem. I put the incriminated documents back in my bag.

Tomorrow... tomorrow is another day. Climbing into my bed, I turn off the light and lie down looking at the ceiling. Oh, I wish I had never met him. My inner goddess shakes her head at me. She and I know that's a lie. I have never felt so alive as now.

I close my eyes and go out in a heavy sleep with occasional dreams of canopy beds and chains and intense gray eyes. Maury wakes me up the next day.

'Naddalin, I called you. You must have been cold outside.

My eyes open reluctantly. She's not just up - she's been for a run. I glance at my

alarm. It's eight in the morning. Saint Moses, I slept a good nine hours.

'What is that?' I mumble asleep.

'There's a man here with a delivery for you. You have to sign for it.'

'What?'

'Come on. It's big. It sounds interesting.' She enthusiastically hops from foot to foot and bounces around the living room. I climb out of bed and grab my dressing gown from the back of my door. A smart young man with a Pittsburgh tail is standing in our living room hugging a large box.

'Hi,' I mumble.

'I'll make you some tea.' Maury rushes to the kitchen.

'Miss Black?

-And-

I immediately know who the package came from.

'Yes,' I replied cautiously.

'I have a package for you here, but I have to configure it and show you how to use it.'

'Really at this time?'

'Only follow orders, ma'am.' He smiles in a charming but professional way that he doesn't take a shit.

Did he just call me madam? Did I age ten years overnight? If I have it, it's this contract. My mouth creases in disgust.

'Okay, what is it?'

'It's a MacBook Pro.'

'Of course it is.' I roll my eyes.

'These are not yet available in stores, ma'am, the latest from Apple.

How it doesn't surprise me, I sigh heavily.

'Just put it on the dining table over there.'

I wander around the kitchen to join Maury.

'What is that?' She said curious, with bright eyes and a bushy tail. She slept well too.

'It's a Grayson laptop.'

'Why did he send you a laptop?' Do you know you can use mine? ' She said, frowning.

Not for what he has in mind.

'Oh, it's only on loan. He wanted me to try it.' My excuse seems weak. But Maury nods. Oh my... I cheated on Mary Smith. A first. She hands me my tea.

The Mac laptop is sleek and silvery and quite good-looking. It has a very large screen.

Grayson Maury loves the scale - I think of his living space, in fact, his entire apartment.

'It has the latest operating system and a full suite of programs, plus a one-point-five terabyte hard drive so you have plenty of room, thirty-two GB of RAM - what are you going to use it for?

'...E-mail.'

'Email' he chokes, amazed, raising his eyebrows with a slightly sick look on his face. 'And maybe Internet research? I shrug my shoulders contrite, he sighs.

Well, this has full wireless N's, and I configured it with your Me account details. This baby is ready to go, virtually Pittsburgh was on the planet. 'He looks at him longingly.

'My account?'

'Your new email address.'

I have an e-mail address?

It points to an icon on the screen and keeps talking to me, but it's like white noise.

I have no idea what he's saying, and in all fairness, I'm not interested. Just tell me how to turn it on and off - I'll find out the rest. After all, I've been using Maury for four years. Maury hisses, impressed when she sees him.

'It's next generation technology.' She raises my eyebrows. 'Most women get flowers or maybe jewelry,' she said suggestively, trying to suppress a smile.

I scowl but can't keep my face straight. We both burst out laughing and the computer man gapes us, puzzled. He finishes and asks me to sign the delivery slip.

As Maury shows him, I sit down with my cup of tea, open the email program, and sit there waiting for me. There's an email from Grayson. My heart jumps in my mouth. I have an email from Grayson Maury. Nervously, I opened it.

~*~

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your new computer

Date: May 22, 2009 11:15 PM

At: Nadalina Black

Dear, Miss Black, I hope you slept well. Hope you will use this laptop wisely as shown.

Can't wait for dinner on Wednesday.

Happy to answer all your questions before then, by email, if you wish.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I pressed the answer.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Your new computer (on loan)

Date: May 23, 2009 8:20 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

I slept very well, thank you - for some strange reason - sir.

I understood that this computer was on loan, not mine.

Naddalin There is almost instantly a response.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your new computer (on loan)

Date: May 23, 2009, 8:22 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

The computer is loaned. On and on, Miss Black.

I can see from your tone that you have read the documentation that I gave you.

Do you have any questions so far?

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I can't help but smile.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Inquiring Minds

Date: May 23, 2009, 8:25 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

I have a lot of questions, but not suitable for email, and some of us have to work for a living.

I don't want or need a computer indefinitely.

Until later, have a good day. Sir.

Naddalin

His response is instantaneous again, and that makes me smile.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your new computer (loaned again)

Date: May 23, 2009, 8:26 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

see yeah, baby.

PS: I also work for a living.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I turned off the computer, smiling like a fool. How can I resist playful Grayson? I'll be late for work. Well, this is my last week - Mr. and Mrs. Eastwood are probably going to give me a little break. I ran into the shower, unable to shake my bright smile. He sent me an e-mail. I am like a dizzy little child. And all the contractual angst fades away. As I wash my hair, I try to think about what I could ask of her by email. It is surely better to talk about these things. Suppose someone hacked their account, I blush at the thought. I dress quickly, hastily shout goodbye to Maury, and head off to work my last week at

Eastwood. Sam calls at eleven o'clock. 'Hey, are we making some coffee?' He looks like old Sam. Sam my friend, not a - what did Grayson call him Suitor? Ugh. 'Sure. I'm at work. Can you come over here to say twelve?' 'See you later.' He hangs up and I go back to restocking the brushes and thinking about Grayson Maury and his contract. Sam is on time. He leaps into the shop like a frolicking puppy with dark eyes. 'Naddalin,' he smiles his dazzling toothy all-Hispanic American smile, and I can't be mad at him anymore. 'Hi Sam.' I hug him. 'I'm starving. I'll just tell Mrs. Eastwood I'm going to lunch.' As we head to the local cafe, I slip my arm into Sam's. I'm so grateful for his normalcy. Someone I know and understand.

'Hi Naddalin,' he whispers. 'Did you really forgive me?' 'Sam, you know I can never stay mad at you for long.' He smiles. I can't wait to get home. The allure of emailing Grayson, and maybe I can start my research project. Maury's out there, so I fire up the new laptop and open my email. Sure enough, there's an email from Grayson in the inbox. I practically jumped out of my seat with joy. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Working for a living Date: May 23, 2009, 5:24 PM To Naddalin Black Deer,

Miss Black, I hope you had a good day at work. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. I pressed the answer. From: Naddalin Black Subject: Work for a Living Date: May 23, 2009, 5:48 PM To Grayson Maury Sir... I had a great day at work. Thank you. Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: Get the job done! Date: May 23, 2009, 5:50 PM To Naddalin Black Miss Black Glad you had a great day. While you are sending an email, you are not doing any research. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: Nuisance Date: May 23, 2009, 5:53 PM To Grayson Maury M. Maury, stop emailing me, and I can begin my assignment. I would like another A. Naddalin, I hug myself. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Impatient Date: May 23, 2009, 5:55 PM To Naddalin Black Miss Black Stop emailing me - and do your mission. I would like to award another A. The first one was so well deserved. ;)

Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Grayson Maury just sent me a blinking smiley… Oh my God. I run Google. From: Naddalin Black Subject: Internet Search Date: May 23, 2009, 5:59 PM To Grayson Maury M. Maury What would you suggest I put in a search

engine? Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: Internet Search Date: May 23, 2009, 6:02 PM To Naddalin Black Miss Black Always start with Wikipedia. No more emails unless you have questions. Heard?

Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: Bossy! Date: May 23, 2009, 6:04 PM To Grayson Murray Yes... sir. You are so bossy. Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: In Control Date: May 23, 2009, 6:06 PM To Naddalin Black Naddalin, you have no idea. Well, maybe a little idea now. To do work. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. I type Submitted in Wikipedia. Half an hour later, I feel slightly uncomfortable and downright shocked deep inside. Do I want this stuff in my head? Jeez - is he doing in the red pain room? I am sitting staring at the screen, and a part of me, a very wet and integral part of me - that I only got to know very recently, is seriously on. Oh my God, some of these things are HOT. But is it for me, damn it... could I do this, I need some space. I need to think.

For the first time in my life, I voluntarily went for a run. I find my ugly, never-used sneakers, sweatpants, and a t-

shirt. I put my hair in pigtails, blushing at the memories they bring back to me and plug in my iPod. I can't sit in front of this technological wonder and watch or read more disturbing material. I need to spend some of this excess, irritating energy. Frankly, I want to run to the Heathman hotel and just demand some control freak's sex. But that's five miles, and I don't think I'll be able to run a mile, let alone five, and of course, he could deny me what would be beyond humiliation.

Maury gets out of his car as I walk out the door. She almost drops her groceries when she sees me. Naddalin Black in sneakers. I salute and do not stop for the inquisition. I need to spend some time alone. Snow Patrol screaming in my ears, I set off into the opal and aquamarine twilight.

I walk in the park. What will I do? I want it, but on its terms, I just don't know. Maybe I should negotiate what I want. Go through this ridiculous contract line by line and say what's okay and what's not. My research has told me that legally this is unenforceable. He must know that. I guess that just sets the parameters of the relationship. It illustrates what I can expect

from him and what he expects from me - my total submission. Am I ready to give this to him, am I even capable?

I am plagued with a question - why is it like this? Is it because he was seduced at such a young age, I just don't know. It is still such a mystery.

I stop next to a large spruce top and put my hands on my knees, breathing hard, drawing precious air into my lungs. Oh, that feels good, cathartic. I can feel my resolve hardening.

Yes. I need to tell him what's right and what's wrong. I have to email him my thoughts, and then we can discuss them on Wednesday. I take a deep breath to clean myself up, then walk back to the apartment.

Maury, like herself, bought clothes for her vacation in Barbados.

Mostly matching bikinis and Dandenongs. She will look fabulous in all of them, but she always makes me sit and comment while she tries each of them. There are only so many ways it can be said - you look fabulous Maury. She has a slim and curvy figure to die for. She doesn't do it on purpose, I know, but I carry my old t-

shirt, sweatpants, and sneakers to my room under the pretext of packing more boxes. Could I be feeling more dissatisfied? Taking the awesome free technology with me, I installed the laptop on my desk. I'm sending Grayson an email.

~*~

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Shocked by the OVHS

Date: May 23, 2009, 8:33 p.m.

To: Grayson Maury

Okay, I've seen enough.

It was good to know you.

Naddalin

I hit send, hugging, laughing at my little joke. Will he find it funny oh shit - probably not. Grayson Maury is not known for his sense of humor. But I know it exists, I have lived it. Maybe I went too far. I'm waiting for his answer.

I wait... and I wait. I watch my alarm clock. Ten minutes have passed.

To distract me from the anxiety that flourishes in my stomach, I start doing what I told Maury I would do: prepare my room. I start by cramming my books into a crate.

At nine o'clock, I heard nothing. Maybe he got out. I sulk irritably as I plug in my iPod headphones, listen to Snow Patrol, and sit down at my small desk to reread the contract and comment.

I don't know why I look up, maybe I catch a slight nudge out of the corner of my eye, I don't know, but when I do he is standing at my bedroom door staring at me carefully. He wears his Maury flannel pants and a white linen shirt, gently twirling his car keys. I take off my headphones and freeze. Shit!

'Good evening, Naddalin. His voice is cold, his expression completely guarded and unreadable. The ability to speak deserts me. Damn Maury for letting him in here without warning. Vaguely, I'm aware that I'm still in my sweat, showerless, disgusting, and he's just gloriously delicious, his pants hanging off his hips, and besides, he's here in my room.

'I felt your email warranted an in-person response,' he explains dryly.

I open my mouth and then close it twice. The joke is on me. Never in this universe or any other universe did I expect him to give up everything and show up here.

'May I sit?' he asks, his eyes dancing humorously now - thank goodness - maybe he'll see the funny side?

I agree. The power of speech remains elusive. Grayson Maury is sitting on my bed.

'I was wondering what your room would look like,' he said.

I glance around, plotting an escape route, no - there is only the door or the window yet.

My room is functional but comfortable - sparse white wicker furniture and a tin double bed with a patchwork quilt, made by my mother when she was in her folk American quilting phase. Everything is pale blue and cream.

'It's very serene and peaceful here,' he whispers. Not at the moment... not with

you here. Finally, my elongated marrow recalls its purpose, I breathe.

'How? 'Or' What... ?'

He smiles at me.

'I'm still at the Heathman.'

I know that.

'Would you like a drink?' Politeness trumps anything I would like to say.

'No, thank you, Naddalin.' He smirked a searing, twisted smile, his head tilted slightly to the side.

Well, maybe I need it.

'So, was it nice to know me?'

Holy cow, is he offended, I look at my fingers. How am I going to get out of this? If I tell him it was a joke I don't think he will be impressed.

'I thought you would respond by email.' My voice is small, pathetic.

'Are you deliberately biting your lower lip?' he asks darkly.

I blink at him, gasping, releasing my lip.

'I didn't know I was biting my lip,' I whisper.

My heart beats wildly. I can feel this pull, this delicious electricity between us charging, filling the space between us with static electricity. He sits so close to me, his dark smoky gray eyes, his elbows resting on his knees, his legs spread. Leaning forward, he slowly undoes one of my braids, his fingers freeing my hair. My breathing is shallow and I cannot move. I watch him mesmerized as his hand moves to my second pigtail, and pulling on the hair tie, he loosens the braid with his long, skillful fingers.

'So you decided to exercise,' he breathes, his voice soft and melodious. His fingers gently tucked my hair behind my ear. 'Why, Naddalin? His fingers go around my ear, and very gently, he pulls on my earlobe, in rhythm. It's so sexual.

'I needed some time to think,' I whisper. I am all rabbit/headlights, moth/flame, bird/snake... and he knows exactly what he's doing to me.

'Thinking of what, Naddalin?'

'You.'

'And you decided it was nice to know me, do you mean to know me in a biblical sense?

Oh shit. I rinse.

'I didn't think you knew the Bible.'

'I went to Sunday school, Naddalin. It taught me a lot.

'I don't remember reading about nipple clamps in the Bible. Maybe you learned from a modern translation.'

Her lips arch with a hint of a smile, and my eyes are drawn to her beautiful sculpted mouth.

'Well, I thought I should come and remind you how nice it was to know me.

Holy shit. I watch him open-mouthed, and his fingers move from my ear to my chin.

'How about that, Miss Black?'

Her gray eyes shine on me, her inherent defiance in her gaze. His lips are parted - he waits, curled up to strike. Desire - sharp, watery and hot, burns deep in my stomach.

I take preventative measures and get started on him. Somehow he's moving, I have no idea how, and in the blink of an eye I'm on the bed pinned under him, my arms outstretched and held over my head, her free hand gripping my face, and her mouth finds mine.

His tongue is in my mouth, claiming and owning me, and I revel in the strength he uses. I feel it against the length of my body. He wants me, and that does strange and delicious things inside of me. Not Maury in her little bikinis, not one of the fifteen, not the mean Mrs. MLF Stiffler's mom. Me. This handsome man wants me. My inner goddess shines so brightly that she could light up Pittsburgh. He stops kissing me and opening his eyes, I find him looking at me.

'Believe me?' he breathes.

I nod, my eyes wide, my heart bouncing on my ribs, my blood thundering around my body, he leans over, and from his pants pocket, he pulls out his silver Maury silk tie… that tie is woven silver Maury which leaves small impressions of its weaving on my skin. He moves so fast, sitting astride me as he ties my wrists together, but this time he ties the other end

of the tie to one of the spokes of my tin headboard. He pulls on my binding to make sure it's secure. I'm not going to Pittsburgh where. I am tied to my bed and so excited.

He slides over me and stands beside the bed, looking at me, eyes dark with desire. His gaze is triumphant, mixed with relief.

'It's better,' he whispers and smiles a mean, knowing smile. He leans over and begins to undo one of my sneakers. Oh no... no... my feet. No, I just ran.

'No,' I protest, trying to dismiss him.

He stops.

'If you have any trouble, I'll tie your feet too.' If you make noise, Naddalin, I'll gag you.

Shut up. Maury is probably out listening right now.

Gag me! Maury! I am silent.

He removes my shoes and socks efficiently and slowly takes off my sweatpants.

Oh - what panties am I wearing? He lifts me and removes the quilt and my quilt from under me and back down, this time onto the sheets.

'Now.' He slowly licks his lower lip. 'You bite that lip, Naddalin. You know the effect it has on me. He places his long index finger over my mouth, a warning.

Oh my. I can barely contain myself, lying helpless, watching him move Billie fully in my room, it's an intoxicating aphrodisiac. Slowly, almost quietly, he takes off his shoes and socks, undoes his pants, and lifts his shirt above his head.

'I think you've seen too much,' he chuckled. He sits astride me again, pulls up my t-shirt and I think he's going to take it off, but he rolls it up to my neck and then pulls it up over my head so he can see my mouth and my nose, but it covers my eyes. And because it's folded up - I can't see anything through it.

'Mmm,' he breathes in appreciation. 'It's getting better and better. I'll have a drink.'

Leaning down, he kisses me, his lips soft against mine, and his weight shifts

off the bed. I hear the silent creak of the bedroom door. Have a drink. WhereHerePittsburgh?

New York, I try to hear it. I can make out some low growls, and I know he's talking to Maury - oh no… he's practically naked. What is she gonna say? I hear a slight popping sound. What is that? He returns, the door creaking again, his feet on the bedroom floor, and the ice clinking against the glass as it swirls in the liquid. What kind of drink? He closes the door and crawls to remove his pants. They fall to the ground and I know he's naked. He sits on top of me again.

'Are you thirsty, Naddalin?' He asks, his voice teasing

'Yes,' I breathe because my mouth is suddenly dry. I hear the ice clinking against the glass, and he sets it down again and leans in and kisses me, pouring a delicious crispy liquid into my mouth as he does. It's white wine. It's so unexpected, hot, albeit icy, and Grayson's lips are cool.

'After?' He whispers.

I agree. It tastes all the more divine since it has been in her mouth. He

leans in and I take another sip of his lips... oh my.

'Let's not go too far, we know your drinking capacity is limited, Naddalin.'

I can't help it. I smile and he leans in to offer another delicious bite. He's moving around so he's lying next to me, his erection on my hip. Oh, I want it inside of me.

'Is that cool?' he asks, but I hear the edge in his voice.

I tense up. He shakes the glass and leans in, kisses me, and deposits a little shard of ice cream in my mouth with a little wine. He slowly and quietly trails icy kisses down the center of my body, from the base of my throat, between my breasts, down my chest and stomach. It makes a shard of ice appear in my navel in a pool of cool, cold wine.

It burns to the bottom of my stomach. Wow.

'Now you have to be quiet,' he whispers. 'If you move, Naddalin, you'll have wine all over the bed.'

My hips flex automatically.

'Oh no. If you spill the wine, I'll punish you, Miss Black.'

I moan and desperately fight the urge to tilt my hips, pulling on my restraint. Oh no...

You're welcome.

With one finger, he lowers my bra cups in turn, my breasts raised, exposed, and vulnerable. Leaning down, he kisses and takes turns pulling each of my nipples with cool, cool lips. I fight my body as it tries to arch its back in response.

'Is that nice?' he breathes while blowing on one of my nipples.

I hear another tinkle of ice, then I can feel it around my right nipple as he pulls on the left one with his lips. I moan, struggling not to move. It is sweet and agonizing torture.

'If you spill the wine, I won't let you come.'

'Oh... please... Grayson... Sir... please.' He drives me crazy. I hear him smile.

The ice in my navel is melting. I am beyond heat - warm and cold and wanting.

Want it inside of me. Now.

His cold fingers drag languidly over my stomach. My skin is hypersensitive, my hips flex automatically, and the now warmer fluid from my navel seeps into my stomach. Grayson moves quickly, licks it with his tongue, kisses me, bites me softly, sucks.

'Oh my God, Naddalin, you moved out. What am I going to do to you?'

I was panting loudly. All I can focus on is his voice and his touch. Nothing else is real. Nothing else matters, nothing else fits on my radar. Her fingers slip into my panties and I'm rewarded with her strong unattended air intake.

'Oh, baby,' he whispers and pushes two fingers inside of me.

I gasp.

'Ready for me so soon,' he said. He temptingly moves his fingers slowly, in, out, and I push against him, tilting my hips up.

'You're a greedy girl,' he growls softly, and his thumb goes around my clit then presses down.

I moan loudly as my body slips under his expert fingers. He reaches out and pushes the shirt over my head so I can see it as I blink in the soft light from my nightlight. I can't wait to touch it.

'I want to touch you,' I breathe.

'I know,' he whispers. He leans in and kisses me, his fingers still moving rhythmically inside me, his thumb spinning and pressing. His other hand pulls my hair away from my head and holds my head in place. Her tongue mirrors the actions of her fingers, calling out for me. My legs start to stiffen as I push against his hand. He softens his hand, so I am brought back from the brink. He does it over and over again. It's so frustrating... Oh please Grayson I'm screaming in my head.

'It's your punishment, so close and yet so far. Is it right?' he breathes in my ear.

I moan, exhausted, pulling against my restraint. I am helpless, lost in an erotic torment.

'Please,' I beg you, and he finally feels sorry for me.

'How am I going to fuck you, Naddalin?'

Oh… my body is starting to shake. He stops again.

'Please.'

'What do you want, Naddalin?'

'You… now,' I cry.

'Should I fuck you this way, or this way, or this way? There is endless choice,' he breathes against my lips. He withdraws his hand and walks over to the nightstand for a sachet of foil. He kneels between my legs, and very slowly removes my panties, staring at me, eyes shining. He puts on the condom. I watch fascinated, hypnotized.

'Is that nice?' he said, stroking himself.

'I meant that as a joke,' I moaned. Please fuck me, Grayson.

He raises his eyebrows as his hand moves up and down its impressive length.

'A joke?' Her voice is menacingly sweet.

'Yes. Please, Grayson,' I beg him.

'Are you laughing now?

'No,' I meow.

I'm just a tight ball of sexual urge. He looks at me for a moment, measuring my need, then suddenly grabs me and turns me around. It takes me by surprise, and because my hands are tied, I have to support myself on my elbows. He pushes both of my knees on the bed so that my butt is up in the air, and he slaps me hard. Before I can react, he dives into me. I scream - from the slap and his sudden assault, and I instantly come back over and over again, falling apart under him as he continues to hit me deliciously. He doesn't stop. I'm exhausted. I can't stand this... and it beats over and over and over again... then I build again... surely not... no...

'Come on, Naddalin, one more time,' he growls through clenched teeth, and incredibly, my body reacts, convulsing around him as I come again, screaming his name. I shatter into tiny fragments again,

and Grayson freezes, finally letting go, silently finding his release.

He collapses on top of me, breathing hard.

'How sweet was that?' he asks through clenched teeth.

Oh my.

I lie down panting and step onto the bed, my eyes closed as he slowly pulls away from me. He gets up immediately and gets dressed. When he's fully dressed, he climbs back onto the bed, gently undoes his tie, and removes my t-shirt. I flex my fingers and rub my wrists, smiling at the woven pattern imprinted on my wrists by the tie. I readjust my bra as he pulls the duvet and quilt over me. I look at him completely stunned, and he gives me a smirk.

'It was really cool,' I whisper, smiling shyly.

'There is still that word.'

'Don't you like that word?'

'No. It doesn't do it for me at all.'

'Oh - I don't know… it seems to have a very beneficial effect on you.'

'I am beneficial, now I am. Could you hurt my ego more, Miss Black?

'I don't think there is anything wrong with your ego.' But even as I say it, I don't feel the conviction of my words - something elusive crosses my mind, a fleeting thought, but it's lost before I can grasp it.

'You think?' Her voice is soft. He's lying next to me, fully dressed, his head resting on his elbow, and I'm only wearing my bra.

'Why don't you like to be touched?'

'I do not do it.' He reaches out and plants a soft kiss on my forehead. 'So this email was your idea of a joke.'

I smile apologetically and shrug my shoulders.

'I see. So, are you still considering my proposal?'

'Your indecent proposal... yes I am. I have problems though.'

He smiles at me as relieved.

'I would be disappointed if you didn't.'

'I was going to email them to you, but you kind of interrupted me.'

'Coitus Interruptus'.

'See, I knew you had a sense of humor in there somewhere.' I smile.

'Only certain things are funny, Naddalin. I thought you were saying no, no discussion at all. His voice drops.

'I don't know yet. I haven't decided yet. Will you stick to me?'

He raises his eyebrows.

'You did your research. I don't know, Naddalin. I never caught anyone.'

Oh… should I be surprised by this, I know so little about the stage… I don't know.

'Did you have a necklace?' I whisper.

'Yes.'

'By Mrs. MLF stifflers mom?'

'Mrs. MLF Stiffler’s mom! he laughs loudly, freely, and he looks so young and carefree, his head thrown back, his laugh infectious.

I smile back at him.

'I'll tell her you said that, she'll love it.'

'Do you still talk to her regularly?' I can't help the shock of my voice.

'Yes.' He's serious now.

Oh... and part of me is suddenly incredibly jealous - I'm disturbed by the depth of my feelings.

'I see.' My voice is tight. 'So you have someone you can discuss your alternative lifestyle with, but I'm not allowed.'

He frowns.

'I don't think I ever thought about it like that. Ms. MLF stifflers mom was part of that lifestyle. I told you, she's a good friend now. If you want, I can introduce you to one of them. my old subs, you could talk to him. '

What is he deliberately trying to bother me?

'Is this your idea of a joke?

'No, Naddalin.' He is puzzled, seriously shaking his head.

'No - I'll do it myself, thank you very much,' I slap him, pulling the comforter up to my chin.

He stares at me, at sea, surprised.

'Naddalin, I...' He lost for words. A first, I think. 'I didn't mean to offend you. '

'I am not offended. I am appalled. '

'Dismayed?'

'I don't want to talk to any of your ex-girlfriends... slave... sub... what you call them.'

'Naddalin Black - are you jealous?'

I blush, crimson.

' You stay? '

'I have breakfast tomorrow at the Heathman. Besides, I told you, I don't sleep with girlfriends, slaves, subs, or anyone.

Friday and Saturday nights were exceptions.

This will not happen again. 'I can hear the resolve behind his soft, husky voice.

I tighten my lips to him.

'Well, I'm tired now.'

'Are you putting me out?' He raised his eyebrows at me, amused and a little dismayed.

'Yes.'

'Well, that's another first.' He looks at me speculatively. 'So nothing you want to discuss now on the contract.'

'No.' I respond with excitement. 'My

God, I would love to give you a good hiding place. You would feel a lot better, and so would I.

'You can't say things like that… I haven't signed anything yet.'

'A man can dream, Naddalin.' He leans over me and grabs my chin. 'Wednesday?'

He whispers and kisses me lightly on my lips.

'Wednesday,' I agree. 'I'll see you outside. If you give me a minute.' I sit and grab my shirt, pushing him out of the way. Amused and reluctant, he gets up from the bed.

'Please pass me on my sweatpants.'
'

He collects them from the ground and hands them to me.

' Yes, Madam. He tries in vain to hide his smile.

3

I squint at him as I slip my pants on. My hair is a mess, and I know I'm going to have to deal with Mary Smith's Inquisition after he leaves. Grabbing a hair tie, I walk to my bedroom door, opening it slightly to see Maury. She's not in the living room. I think I can hear him on the phone in his room. Grayson follows me outside. During the short walk from the bedroom to the front door, my thoughts and feelings come and go, transform. I am no longer angry with him, I suddenly feel unbearable

shyness. I don't want him to go. the first time around, I wish he wanted - normal - a normal relationship that didn't require a ten-page agreement, a whip and carabiners in the ceiling of his rec room

I open the door for him and look at my hands. This is my first time having sex at home, and as far as sex goes, I think it was great. But now I feel like a receptacle - an empty container to fill at will. My subconscious shakes its head.

You wanted to run to the Heathman for sex - you had it delivered express. She crosses her arms and pats her foot with a complaining look on her face. Grayson stops at the door and squeezes my chin, forcing my eyes to meet his. His forehead creases slightly.

'It's okay?' he asks tenderly as his thumb lightly strokes my lower lip.

'Yes.' I answer, but in all honesty, I'm not sure. I feel a paradigm shift. I know if I do this thing with him, I'll be hurt. He is no longer able, interested, or ready to offer me more... and I want more. Much more. The wave of jealousy I felt just moments ago tells me that I have deeper feelings for him than I admitted.

'Wednesday,' he confirms, and he leans forward and kisses me softly. Something changes as he kisses me, his lips become more pressing against mine, his hand moves up my chin and he holds the side of my head, his other hand on the other side. His breathing quickens. He deepened the kiss, leaning against me. I put my hands on his arms.

I want to run them through his hair, but I resist, knowing he won't like it. He rests his forehead against mine, his eyes closed, his voice strained.

'Naddalin,' he whispers. 'What are you doing to me?'

'I could tell you the same thing,' I whisper back.

Taking a deep breath, he kisses my forehead and walks away. He deliberately walks down the path to his car as he runs his hand through his hair. Looking up as he opened his car door, he smiled his breathtaking smile. My smile in response is faint, completely dazzled by him, and I remember once again Icarus hovering too close to the Sun. I close the front door as he gets into his sports car. I have an irresistible urge to cry, a sad and lonely

melancholy grips me and tightens around my heart. Coming back to my bedroom, I close the door and lean against her, trying to rationalize my feelings. I can not. Slipping on the floor, I put my head in my hands as my tears started to fall.

Maury knocks softly.

'Naddalin? she whispers. I open the door. She looks at me and throws her arms around me.

'What's wrong? What did that scary bastard do?'

'Oh Murr, nothing I didn't want him to do.

She pulls me to my bed and we sit down.

'You have terrible sex hair.'

Despite my poignant sadness, I laughed.

'It was good sex, not great at all.'

Maury smiles.

'It's better. Why are you crying, you never cry.' She retrieves my brush from

the side table and, sitting behind me, very slowly begins to brush the knots.

'I just don't think our relationship is going to go to Pittsburgh where.' I look at my fingers.

'I thought you said you were going to see him on Wednesday?'

'I am, that was our original plan.'

'So why did he come here today?'

'I sent him an email.'

'Ask him to drop by?'

'No, saying I didn't want to see him arnymore.'

'And he introduces himself to Naddalin, that's genius.'

'It was actually a joke.'

'Oh. Now I'm really confused.'

Patiently, I explain the essence of my email without revealing anything

'So you thought he would respond by email.'

'Yes.

'But instead, he comes here

'Yes.'

'I would say he's completely in love with you.'

I frown. Grayson, loving me. He's just looking for a new toy - a handy new toy that he can lie in and do nondescript things. My heart sinks painfully.

This is the reality.

'He came here to fuck me, that's all.

'Who said romance was dead?' she whispers in horror. I was shocked Maury. I didn't think it was possible. I shrug my shoulders to apologize.

'He uses sex as a weapon.'

'Fuck you in submission?' She shakes her head in disapproval. I blink quickly at her, and I can feel the blush spreading across my face. Oh... spot-on, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Mary Smith.

'Naddalin, I don't understand, did you just let him make love to you?'

'No, Maury, we don't have sex - we fuck - Grayson's terminology. He doesn't have sex.

'I knew there was something weird about him. He's having engagement issues.'

I nod, as if in agreement. Internally, I am longing. Oh, Murr... I wish I could tell you everything, all about this weird, sad, perverted guy, and you could tell me to forget about him. Keep me from being a fool.

'I guess it's all a little overwhelming,' I whisper. That's the understatement of the year. Because I don't want to talk about Grayson anymore, I ask him about Jack. All of Maury's demeanor changes at the mere mention of her name, she lights up from within, beaming at me

'He's coming early Saturday to help load.' She hugged the hairbrush, the boy misunderstood her, and I felt a faint, familiar urge. Maury has found herself a normal man and she looks so happy.

I turn around and hug her.

'Oh, I meant. Your dad called while you were… uh, busy. Apparently Bob suffered an injury, so he and your mom

can't graduate. But your dad will be here on Thursday. He'll be here on Thursday. wants to call you.'

'Oh... my mom never called me. Is Bob okay?'

'Yes. Call her tomorrow morning. It's late now.'

'Thanks, Maury. I'm fine now. I'll call Ray in the morning too. I think I'll just surrender.' She smiles, but her eyes narrow in the corners with concern.

After he leaves, I sit down and reread the contract, taking more notes as I go. When I'm done, I turn on the laptop, ready to answer.

There's an email from Grayson in my inbox.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Tonight

Date: May 23, 2009 11:16 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Miss Black

I look forward to receiving your notes on the contract.

Until then, sleep well baby.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Problems

Date: May 24, 2009 12:02 AM

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

Here is my list of problems. I look forward to discussing this in more detail at dinner on Wednesday.

The numbers refer to clauses:

1. I don't know why this is only for MY benefit - ie to explore MY sensuality and my limits. I'm sure I wouldn't need a ten-page contract to do this! This is surely for YOUR benefit.
2. As you know, you are my only sex partner. I am not on drugs and have not

had a blood transfusion. I'm probably safe. What do you think?

3. I can cancel at any time if I don't think you are sticking to the agreed limits. Alright - I like it.

4. Obey yourself in all things Accept your discipline without hesitation We need to talk about it.

5. One-month trial period. Not three.

6. I can't commit to every weekend. I have a life or I will have a life. Maybe three out of four.

7. Use my body as you see fit sexually or otherwise - please define 'or otherwise'.

8. This whole disciplinary clause. I'm not sure I want to be whipped, flogged, or bodily punished. I am convinced that this would be contrary to Articles 2 to 5. And also 'for any other reason. It's just mean - and you told me you weren't a sadist.

9. For example, loaning me to someone else would be an option. But I'm glad it's here in black and white.

10. The rules. More information on these later.

11. Touch me without your permission. What's the deal with that? You know I don't do it anyway.

12. Discipline - Please see clause 15.5 above.

13. I can't look you in the eye, why?

14. Why can't I touch you?

Rules:

Sleep - I agree to 6 hours. Food - I do not eat food on a prescribed list. The Food List Goes Where I Do - Deal breaker. Clothes - as long as I just have to wear your clothes when I'm with you... okay. Exercise - We agreed on 3 hours, which says another 4.

Soft limits:

Can we go through all of this? No fisting of any kind. What are Genital Clamps - you're kidding me.

Can you please let me know the arrangements for Wednesday I am working until 5 pm that day?

Good night.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Tonight

Date: May 24, 2009 12:07 AM

To: Naddalin Black

Miss Black

It's a long list. Why are you still standing?

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Burn Midnight Oil

Date: May 24, 2009 12:10 am

To: Grayson Maury

Sir…?...

If you remember I was going through this list when I was distracted and bedridden by a manic passage of control.

Good evening.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Stop Burning Midnight Oil

Date: May 24, 2009 12:12 AM

To: Naddalin Black

GO TO BED Naddalin.

Grayson Murray

CEO and Control Freak, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Oh... garish capitals! I go out. How can he intimidate me when he's ten kilometers away?

I shake my head. My heart still heavy, I climb into bed and instantly fall into a deep but troubled sleep.

The next day, I call my mother when I come home from work. It was a relatively peaceful day at the Eastwood's, leaving me too much time to think. I'm flustered, nervous about my confrontation with Mr. Control Freak tomorrow, and deep down I'm worried that maybe I was too negative in my response to the contract. Maybe he'll undo it all.

My mother is in a grip of contrition, desperately sorry that I did not graduate. Bob has twisted a ligament, which means he's drinking all over the

place. Honestly, he's as accident-prone as I am. He is expected to heal completely, but that means he is resting, and my mom has to wait for his sore hand and foot.

'Naddalin honey, I'm so sorry,' my mom moaned over the phone.

'Mom, it's okay. Ray will be there.'

'Naddalin, you sound distracted - are you okay, baby?'

'Yes, mom,' Oh if you only knew. There is an extremely rich guy that I have met and he wants some kind of weird, kinky kind of sex that I have no say in.

'Did you meet any?

'No mother.' I'm not going there at the moment.

'Well, honey, I'll be thinking of you on Thursday. I love you… you know that honey?' I close my eyes, his precious words give me a warm glow inside.

'I love you too, mom. Say hello to Bob, and I hope he's better soon.'

'I'll do it, honey. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye.'

I got lost in my room with the phone. Lazily, I turn on the average machine and launch the mail program. There's an email from Grayson late last night or very early this morning, depending on your perspective. My heart rate instantly increases and I hear blood pumping into my ears. Holy shit... maybe he said no - that's it - maybe he's canceling dinner. The thought is so painful. I quickly reject it and open the email.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your problems

Date: May 24, 2009, 1:27 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

After my closer examination of your problems, may I draw your attention to the definition of submissive?

Submissive [s uhb-mis-iv] - adjective 1. inclined or ready to submit; obedient without resistance or humbly: submissive servants. Marked by or indicating submission: a submitted response.

Origin: 1580 - 90; submit + -ive

Synonyms: 1. treatable, compliant, flexible, adaptable. 2. passive, resigned, patient, docile, tame, submissive. AntoPittsburghms: 1. rebellious, disobedient.

Please keep this in mind at our Wednesday meeting.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

My first feeling is a feeling of relief. He's ready to at least discuss my issues, and he still wants to meet tomorrow. After reflection, I answer.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: My problems... What about your problems?

Date: May 24, 2009 6:29 PM

To: Grayson Maury

Sir...?...

Please note the original date: 1580-90. I respectfully remind Monsieur that it is 2009. We have come a long way since then.

May I offer you a definition to consider for our meeting: compromise [kom-pr uh-mahrez] - noun

1. settlement of disputes by mutual concessions; an agreement obtained by adjusting claims, principles, etc. contradictory or opposed, by reciprocal modification of requests. 2. the result of such settlement. 3. Something in between different things: the split-level is a compromise between a ranch house and a house with several floors. Endangerment, esp. reputation; exposure to danger, suspicion, etc.: a compromise on its integrity.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: What about my problems?

Date: May 24, 2009 6:32 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Good point, well done, as always, Miss Black. I will pick you up from your apartment tomorrow at 7:00 am.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: 2009 - Women can drive

Date: May 24, 2009 6:40 PM

To: Grayson Maury

Mr._ I have a car. I can drive.

I'd rather meet you somewhere.

Where am I going to meet you?

At your hotel at 7:00 am?

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Stubborn Young Women

Date: May 24, 2009 6:43 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

I am referring to my email dated May 24, 2009, sent at 1:27 am and to the definition contained therein.

Do you ever think you can do as you are told?

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Intractable Men

Date: May 24, 2009 6:49 PM

To: Grayson Maury

Mr. Maury

I would like to drive.

Please.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Exasperated Men

Date: May 24, 2009 6:52 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Fine.

My hotel at 7:00 a.m.

I'll meet you at the Marble Bar.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

He's even cranky by email. Doesn't he understand that maybe I need to get away quickly? Not that my Beetle is fast... but still - I need a way to escape.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Men not so intractable

Date: May 24, 2009 6:55 PM

To: Grayson Maury

Thank you.

Naddalin x

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Exasperating Women

Date: May 24, 2009 6:59 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black From

Nothing.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I call Ray, who's about to watch the Sounders play for a Salt Lake City football team, so our conversation is thankfully short. He is in the car Thursday to graduate. He wants to take me for a meal afterward. My heart swells as I speak to Ray, and a huge lump tightens in my throat. He's been my constant through mom's romantic ups and downs. We have a special bond that I treasure. Even though he's my stepdad, he always treated me like his, and I can't wait to see him. It's been too long. His quiet courage is what I need now, what I miss. Maybe I can channel my Inner Ray for my meeting tomorrow.

Maury and I focus on the packaging, sharing a bottle of cheap red wine as we do. When I finally go to bed, having almost finished preparing my room, I feel calmer. The physical activity of boxing everything was a welcome distraction, and I'm tired. I want a good night's sleep. I snuggle up in my bed and fall asleep soon.

Paul is back from Princeton before leaving for New York to begin an internship with a finance company Pittsburgh. He follows me around the store all day to ask for an appointment. It's boring.

'Paul, for the hundredth time, I have a date tonight.'

'No you don't, you just say that to avoid me. You always avoid me.'

Yes... you'd think you understood the hint.

'Paul, I never thought it was a good idea to go out with the boss's brother.'

'You end up here on Friday. You don't work tomorrow.'

'And I'll be in New York on Saturday and you'll be in New York soon.' We couldn't get much further away if we tried. Besides, I have an appointment tonight.

'With Sam?

'No.'

'Which then?'

'Paul… oh. My sign is exasperated. He won't let go. 'Grayson Murray'. I can't help the boredom in my voice. But it does the trick. Paul's mouth opens, and he opens my mouth open, has gone mute. Humph - even his name makes people speechless.

'You have a date with Grayson Maury,' he said finally, once he got over the shock. Disbelief is evident in his voice.

'Yes.'

'I see.' Paul looks downright taken aback, even stunned, and a very small part of him wants him to find it a surprise. My inner goddess too. She makes him a very vulgar and unattractive gesture with her fingers.

After that he ignores me, and at five o'clock I'm out, pronto.

Maury lent me two dresses and two pairs of shoes for tonight and graduation tomorrow. I wish I could feel more excited about clothes and go the extra mile, but clothes just aren't my thing. What's your thing, Naddalin Grayson's whispered question haunts me. Shaking my head and trying to calm my nerves, I choose the plum-colored sheath dress for tonight.

It's wise and vaguely professional - after all, I'm negotiating a contract.

I shower, I shave my legs and armpits, I wash my hair, then I spend a good half an hour drying it so that it falls in soft waves on my breasts and down my back. I slide a comb-over to keep one side of my face and apply mascara and lip gloss. I rarely wear makeup - it intimidates me. None of my literary heroines have had to put on makeup - I might know more if they had. I put on the plum stiletto heels to match the dress, and I'm ready at six-thirty.

'Good?' I ask Maury.

She smiles.

'Boy, you scrub well, Naddalin.' She nods approvingly. 'You look sexy.'

'Hot! I'm aiming for a sober and professional attitude.'

'That too, but mostly hot. The dress really suits you and your coloring. The way it hangs.' She smiles.

'Maury! Is cold.

'Just to keep it true, Naddalin. The whole package - looks good. Keep the dress on. You'll eat it out of your hand.'

My mouth presses into a hard line. Oh, you got it the wrong way.

'Wish me good luck.'

'Do you need luck on a date?' His brow furrows, puzzled.

'Yes, Maury.

'Well, good luck.' She hugs me and I'm through the front door.

I have to drive barefoot - Wanda, my navy Beetle, was not designed to be driven by wearers of stilettos. I stop in front of the Heathman at precisely six fifty-eight and give my car keys to the valet to park. He looks askance at my Ladybug, but I ignore him. Taking a deep breath and mentally girding my loins, I walk towards the hotel.

Grayson is casually leaning against the bar, drinking a glass of white wine. He is dressed in his usual white linen shirt, black jeans, black tie, and black jacket. Her hair is still tousled. I sigh. Of course, he looks gorgeous. I stand for a few seconds at

the entrance of the bar, looking at him, admiring the view. He is beyond the beautiful. He glances, nervously I think, towards the entrance and stops when he sees me. Blinking a few times, he then smiles a slow, lazy, sexy smile that leaves me speechless and all melted inside. Making a supreme effort not to bite my lip, I step forward aware that I, Naddalin Black of Clumsy Ville, wear stilettos. He graciously walks to meet me.

'You look beautiful,' he whispered, leaning in to kiss my cheek briefly. 'A dress, Miss Black. I approve. Taking my arm, he leads me to a secluded booth and waves to the waiter.

'What would you like to drink?'

My lips curl up in a quick, sly smile as I sit down and slip into the cabin - well, at least he's asking me to.

'I'll get what you have, please.' See! I can play nicely and behave.

Amused, he orders another glass of Sancerre and slips in front of me.

'They have a great wine cellar here,' he said, tilting his head to the side.

Resting his elbows on the table, he crossed his fingers over her beautiful mouth, his gray eyes alive with an unreadable emotion. And that's there... that familiar attraction and load coming from him, it connects somewhere deep inside me. I move uncomfortably under his shruti Pittsburgh, my heart pounding. I have to keep my cool.

'Are you nervous?' He asks softly.

'Yes.'

He leans forward.

'Me too,' he whispers conspiratorially. My eyes shoot up to meet him. Him. Nervous.

Never, I blink at him, and he smiles his adorable, lopsided smile at me. The waiter arrives with my wine, a small dish of mixed nuts, and another of olives.

'So, how are we going to do this?' I ask. 'Go through my points one by one?'

'Impatient as always, Miss Black.'

'Well, could I ask you what you thought of the weather today?'

He smiles and his long fingers bend down to pick up an olive. He puts it in his mouth, and my eyes linger over his mouth, that mouth, that has been on me... all parts of me. I rinse.

'I thought the weather wasn't great today,' he said with a smirk.

'Are you smiling at me, Mr. Maury?'

'I am, Miss Black.'

'You know this contract is legally unenforceable.'

'I am fully aware of this, Miss Black.'

'Were you going to tell me that at some point?

He frowns.

'You would think I would force you to do something you don't want to do and then pretend I have a legal hold on you?

'Well yes.'

'You don't think very well of me at all, do you?'

'You didn't answer my question.'

4

'Naddalin, it doesn't matter if it's legal or not. This represents an arrangement that I would like to make with you - what I would like from you and what you can expect from me. If you don't like it, then don't sign. If you sign and then decide you don't like it, there are enough exit clauses that you can walk away from it. Even if it were legally binding, do you think I would take you through the courts if you did decide to show up? '

I take a long sip of my wine. My subconscious hits me hard on the shoulder. You have to keep the spirit on you. Do not drink too much.

'Such relationships are built on honesty and trust,' he continues. 'If you don't trust me - trust me to know how I affect you, how far I can go with you, how far I can take you - if you can't be honest with me then we really can't do that. '

Oh my gosh, we got right to the point quickly. How far he can take me. Holy shit. What does it mean?

'So, it's pretty simple, Naddalin. Do you trust me or not?' His eyes are burning, fervent. 'Have you had similar discussions with uh… the fifteen?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because, they were all established submissives. They knew what they wanted out of a relationship with me and generally what I expected. With them it was just a matter of fine-tuning the soft boundaries, details like it.'

'Is there a store you go to, Submissive R Us?'

He's laughing.

'Not exactly.'

'Then how?'

'Is that what you want to discuss or do we need to get down to business with your problems, as you say.'

I swallow. Do I trust him? Does it all boil down to - trust, surely it should be a two-way street. I remember his snot when I called Sam.

'You are hungry?' he asks, distracting me from my thoughts.

Oh no... food.

'No.'

'Did you eat today?'

I am watching him. Honesty... Holy shit, he won't appreciate my answer.

'No.' My voice is small.

He narrows his eyes.

'You have to eat, Naddalin. We can eat here or in my suite. What do you prefer?

'I think we should stay in public, on neutral ground.'

He smiles Saraindonically.

'Do you think that would stop me?' he said softly, a sensual warning.

My eyes widen and I swallow again.

'I hope.'

'Come on, I booked a private dining room. No audience.' He smiles

enigmatically at me and leaves the cabin, holding out his hand.

'Bring your own wine,' he whispers.

Placing my hand in his, I slip in and stand next to him. He frees me and his hand reaches my elbow. He leads me back through the bar and climbs the grand stairs to a mezzanine. A young man in full Heathman livery approaches us.

'Mr. Maury, over here sir.

We follow him through a plush seating area to an intimate dining room. Just an isolated table. The bedroom is small but sumptuous. Under a sparkling chandelier, the table is all in starched linen, crystal glasses, silver cutlery, and a bouquet of white roses. Old-fashioned and sophisticated charm permeates the paneled room. The waiter pulls out my chair and I sit down. He places my towel on my lap. Grayson is sitting across from me. I look at him: 'Don't bite your lip,' he whispers.

I frown. Damn it. I don't even know I'm doing it.

'I have already ordered. Hope you don't mind.'

Frankly, I'm relieved I'm not sure I can make any other decisions.

'No, it's okay,' I agree.

'It's good to know that you can be docile. Now, where were we?

'The most concrete.' I take another big sip of the wine. It's delicious. Grayson Maury makes wine well. I remember the last sip of wine he gave me in my bed. I blushed at the intrusive thought.

'Yes, your problems.' He rummages in the inside pocket of his jacket and pulls out a piece of paper.

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My email.

'Clause 2. Okay. It's in both of our interests. I'll rephrase.'

I blink at him. Holy shit... we're going to go through each of these points one by one. I don't feel so brave face to face. He looks so serious. I hang in there with another sip of my wine. Grayson continues.

'My sexual health. Well, all of my previous partners have had blood tests, and I do regular tests every six months for any health risks you mention. All of my recent tests are clear. never used drugs. In fact, I am staunchly anti-drugs. I have a strict no-tolerance policy on drugs for all of my employees, and I insist on random drug testing. '

Wow... the controlled madness has gone mad. I blink at him shocked.

'I have never had a blood transfusion. Does that answer your question?'

I nod, impassive.

'Your next point I mentioned earlier. You can leave anytime, Naddalin. I won't stop you. If you do, though - that's it. Just so you know.'

'Alright,' I replied softly. If I go, that's all. The thought is surprisingly painful.

The server arrives with our first course. How can I eat the Holy Moses? He ordered oysters on a bed of ice.

'Hope you like oysters.' Grayson's voice is soft.

'I never had one.' Never.

'Good.' He hits one. 'All you do is tip and Swallow. I think you can get this done. He looks at me and I know what he's talking about. I blush scarlet. He smiles at me, squirts lemon juice on his oyster, then pours it into his mouth.

'Hmm, delicious. Taste of the sea,' he smirked at me. 'Go ahead,' he encourages.

'So, I'm not chewing it?

'No, Naddalin, you don't.' His eyes are full of humor. He looks so young like that. I bite my lip and his expression instantly changes. He looks at me sternly. I reach out and pick up my very first oyster. Alright... nothing is going on. I throw some lemon juice on it and spill it. It slips down my throat, all the seawater, salt, the sharp citrus flavor, and flesh... ooh. I lick my lips, and he looks at me intently, his eyes clouded.

'Good?'

'I'll have another one,' I said dryly.

'Good girl,' he said proudly.

'Did you choose them deliberately, aren't they known for their aphrodisiac qualities?' 'No, this is the first item on the menu. I don't need an aphrodisiac near you. I think you know it, and I think you react the same near me', he said simply, 'So where were we?' He glances at my email as I search for another oyster.

He reacts in the same way. I affect him... wow.

'Obey me in all things. Yes, I want you to do this. I need you to do this. Think of it like a role play Naddalin.'

'But I'm afraid you will hurt me.'

'How did you hurt?'

'Physically.' And emotionally.

'Do you really think I would do this Beyond any limit you can't take?'

'You said you had hurt someone before.'

'Yes, I did. It was a long time ago.'

'How did you hurt them?'

'I hung them from my playroom ceiling. That’s one of your questions.

Hanging - that's what the carabiners are. Are in the playroom rope game One of the ropes was tied too tightly. '

I hold my hand begging him to stop.

'I don't need to know anymore. So you won't suspend me then? '

'Not if you really don't want to. You can make it a hard limit.'

'Okay.'

'So Obey, do you think you can get this done?'

He looks at me, his intense gray eyes. The seconds tick away.

'I could try,' I whisper.

' Well. ' He smiles. 'Now run. One month instead of three isn't the time at all, especially if you want a weekend away from me every month. I don't think I will be able to stay away from you during this time. I can barely do it now, 'he pauses.

Can't he stay away from me? What?

'How about, one day out of a weekend a month you happen to yourself - but I have a midweek night this week?'

' Okay.‘

'And please let's try it for three months. If it's not for you then you can go to Pittsburgh time.'

'Three months?' I feel confused. I take another sip of the wine and offer myself another oyster. I could learn to like it.

'The property thing is just terminology and goes back to the principle of obeying. It's to put you in the right frame of mind, to understand where I'm from.

-And-

I want you to know that as soon as you cross my submission threshold, I will do what I love for you. You must accept this and willingly. That's why you have to trust me.

I'm going to fuck you, anytime, anyway, I want - where I want. I'm going to

discipline you because you're going to screw it up. I will train you to please me. But I know you've never done this before.

At first, we'll take it slow and I'll help you. We will build it in various scenarios. I want you to trust me, but I know I have to earn your trust, and I will. The 'or otherwise- again, this is to help you get into the state of mind, it means anything goes. '

He's so passionate, fascinating. It's his obsession, the way he is… I can't take my eyes off him. He wants it. He stops talking and looks at me.

'Always with me?' He whispers, his voice rich, warm, and alluring. He takes a sip of his wine, his penetrating gaze holding mine.

The waiter comes to the door, and Grayson subtly nods allowing the waiter to clear our table.

'Would you like some more wine?'

'I have to drive.'

'A little water then?'

I agree.

'Still or sparkling?'

'Sparkling,'

The waiter leaves.

'You are very calm,' Grayson whispers.

'You are very talkative.'

He smiles.

'Discipline. There is a very fine line between pleasure and pain Naddalin. They are two sides of the same coin, one not existing without the other. I can show you how painful the pain is. can be nice. You don't believe me now, but that's what I mean about trust. There will be pain, but nothing you can't handle. Again, that's a question trust me. Do you trust me, Naddalin? '

6

Naddalin!

'Yes, I do.' I answer spontaneously, without thinking… because it's true - I trust him.

'Well,' he looks relieved. 'The rest of this stuff is just details.'

'Important details.'

'Okay, let's talk about it.'

My head floats with all his words. I should have brought Maury's mini-disc player so I could listen to this. There is so much information, so much to process. The waiter reappears with our main dishes: black cod, asparagus, and mashed potatoes with a hollandaise sauce. I have never felt less to eat.

'I hope you like fish,' Grayson said softly.

I stab my food and take a long glass of sparkling water. I vehemently wish it was wine.

'The rules. Let's talk about it. Is food a deciding factor?'

'Yes.'

'May I edit it to say that you will eat at least three meals a day?'

'No.' I'm not backing down. No one is going to tell me what to eat.

How I fuck, yes, but eat... no, no way.

He tightens his lips.

'I need to know that you are not hungry.'

I frown. Why?

'You will have to do it. Trust me.'

He looks at me for a moment, and he relaxes.

'Touch, Miss Black,' he said quietly, 'I concede food and sleep.'

'Why can't I look at you?'

'That's it. A Dom / sub thing. You'll get used to it.'

Do I want… this?

'Why can't I touch you?'

'Because you can't.'

His mouth attaches in a mulish line.

'Is it because of Mrs. MLF stifflers mom?'

He looks mockingly at me.

'Why do you think that? And immediately he understands. 'Do you think she trauma-mated me? '

I nod my head.

'No Naddalin. This is not the reason. Besides, Mrs. MLF stifflers mom wouldn't take anyof that shit from me. '

Oh... but I have to do it. I sulk.

'So nothing to do with it.'

'No. And I don't want you touching each other, either.'

What Ah yes, the non-masturbation clause.

'Out of curiosity... why?’

'Because, I want all of your pleasure,' her voice is hoarse but determined.

Oh... I don't have an answer to that. On one level it's up there with 'I wanna bite that lip', on another, it's so selfish. I frown and take a bite of cod, trying to mentally assess what concessions I've 'won.' food, sleep, I can look him in the

eye. it's going to take it slow, and we haven't discussed the soft limits. But I'm not sure I can cope with that with the food.

'I' gave you a lot to think about, didn't I? '

'Yes.'

'Do you also want to cross the soft boundaries now?'

'Not during dinner.'

He smiles.

'Squeamish?'

' Something like that. '

'You haven't eaten much.'

'I have enough.'

'Three oysters, four bites of cod and a stalk of asparagus, no potatoes, no nuts, no olives, and you haven't eaten it all day. You said I could trust you. '

Damn it. He kept an inventory.

'Grayson, please, it's not everyday that I sit in conversations like this.'

'I need you to be fit and healthy Naddalin.'

' I know. '

'And... now- I want to take you off that dress.'

I swallow. Peel me off Maury's dress. I feel the pull deep in my stomach. The muscles I know better now tighten at his words. But I

I can't have this. His most powerful weapon, used against me again. He's so good at sex - although I understood that. 'I don't think that's a good idea,' I whisper. 'We didn't have dessert.'

'Um, do you want a dessert? He sniffs.

'Yes.'

'You could be dessert,' he whispers suggestively.

'I'm not sure I'm gentle enough. '

Naddalin, you are deliciously sweet. I know. '

'Grayson. You are using sex as a weapon. It's not fair.' I whisper, looking at

my hands, then looking directly at him. He raises his eyebrows, surprised, and I see him reflecting on me. words. 'He strokes his chin thoughtfully.

' You are right.. I do. In life, you use what you know, Naddalin. It doesn't change how much I want you. Here. Now. '

How can he seduce me just with his voice? I'm already panting - my hot blood running through my veins, my nerves are tingling.

'I would like to try something,' he hisses.

I frown. He just gave me a shot of ideas to deal with and now this.

'If you were my sub, you wouldn't have to think about it. It would be easy.' Her voice is soft, alluring. 'All of these decisions - all of the tiring thought processes behind them. Is this the right thing to do? Can it happen here?

You wouldn't have to worry about any of these details. This is what I would do as your Dom. And now I know you want me, Naddalin. '

My frown deepened. How can he tell?

'I can say it because...'

7

Holy shit, he's answering my unspoken question. Is he also psychic?

'... Your body is abandoning you. You press your thighs together, you're flushed and your breathing has changed.'

Oh, this is too much.

'How do you know about my thighs?' My voice is low, incredulous. They are under the table for heaven's sake.

'I felt the slick move, and that's a calculated guess based on years of experience.

I'm right, am I not? '

I blush and look at my hands. That's what bothers me in this game of seduction. He is the only one who knows and understands the rules. I am too naive and inexperienced. My only sphere of reference is Maury, and she doesn't take any shit from men. My other references are

all fictitious: Elizabeth Bennett would be outraged, Jane Eyre too scared and Tess would succumb, just like me.

'I haven't finished my cod.'

'Do you prefer cold cod to me?'

My head rises to stare at him, and his gray eyes burn molten silver, with compelling need.

'I thought you liked me cleaning my plate.'

'Right now, Miss Black, I couldn't give a fuck about your food.'

'Grayson. You just don't fight.'

'I know. I've never done it.'

My inner goddess frowns at me. You can do that, she cuddles - plays this sex god at his own game. May I well. What to do My inexperience is an albatross around my neck.

Pick up an asparagus spear, I look at him and bite my lip. Then, very slowly, I put the tip of my cold asparagus in my mouth and I suck it. Eyes of Grayson widens ad infinitum, but I notice.

'Naddalin. What are you doing?'

I bite the end.

'I eat my asparagus.'

Grayson moves in his seat.

'I think you are playing with me, Miss Black.'

I pretend innocent.

'I'm just finishing my food, Mr. Maury.'

The waiter chooses this moment to knock and, spontaneously, enter. He throws a brief coup d ' eye in Grayson, who frowns and nods, then the server clears our plates. The arrival of the waiter broke the spell. And I seize this precious moment of clarity. I have to go. Our meeting will only end one way if I stay, and I need some boundaries after such an intense conversation. As much as my body longs for his touch, my mind rebels. I need some distance to think about everything he said. I still haven't made a decision, and her sexual allure and prowess don’t make it any easier.

'Would you like a dessert?' Grayson asks, never sir, but his eyes still flare.

'No, thanks. I think I should go.' I look at my hands.

'Come on?' He couldn't hide his surprise.

The waiter leaves in a hurry.

8

'Yes.' It's the right decision. If I stay here, in this room with him, he's going to fuck me. I stand up, resolutely. 'We both have the graduation ceremony in Pittsburgh tomorrow.'

Grayson automatically rises, revealing years of ingrained civility.

'I don't want you to go.'

'Please... I have to do it.'

' Why?

'Because you've given me so much to consider... and I need a little distance.'

'I could make you stay,' he threatens.

'Yes, you could easily, but I don't. Want you to.'

He runs his hand through his hair, looking at me intently.

'You know, when you fell into my office to question me, you were all yes sir, no sir.

I thought you were a natural-born submissive. But frankly, Naddalin, I'm not sure you have a delicious submission bone in your body. 'He walks slowly over to me as he speaks, his voice strained.

'You might be right,' I breathe.

'I want the opportunity. To explore the possibility of you doing it,' he whispered, staring at me. He reaches out and strokes my face, his thumb tracing my lower lip, 'I don't know any other way, Naddalin. This is who I am.'

' I know. '

He leans in to kiss me, but stops before his lips touch mine, his eyes searching mine, wanting, asking permission. I lift my lips to him, and he kisses me and because I don't know if I'll kiss him someday, I let go - my hands move on their own and twist in his hair, pulling him towards him. me, my mouth opening, my tongue stroking hers. His hand gripped

the nape of my neck as he deepened the kiss, responding to my ardor. His other hand slides down my back and flattens out at the base of my spine as he pushes me against his body. 'Can't I persuade you to stay?' he breathes between two kisses.

' no '

'Spend the night with me. '

'And not touch you No.' '

He moans.

'You impossible girl. He pulls back, looking at me. 'Why do I think you say goodbye to me?' '

'Because, I'm leaving now.'

'That's not what I mean, and you know it.'

'Grayson, I have to think about it. I don't know if I can have the kind of relationship you want.'

He closes his eyes and presses his forehead against mine, giving us both a chance to slow our breathing. After a while, he kisses my forehead, takes a deep breath, his nose in my hair, then pulls me back.

'As you wish, Miss Black,' he said, his face straight. 'I will escort you to the lobby.'

He holds out his hand. Leaning down, I take my purse and put my hand in hers. Holy shit, that could be it. I follow him obediently on the main staircase and in the hall, my scalp pricks me, my blood flows. It could be the last goodbye if I decide to say no.

My heart contracts painfully in my chest. What a turnaround. How different a moment of clarity can make for a girl.

'Do you have your valet ticket?'

I dig into my wallet and give him the ticket, which he gives to the porter. I watch him while we wait.

'Thanks for dinner,' I whisper.

'It's a pleasure as always, Miss Black,' he said politely, though he looked deep in thought, completely distracted.

Looking at him, I remember his beautiful profile. The idea that I may never see him again haunts me, intrusive and too painful to contemplate. He turns abruptly, staring at me, his expression intense.

'You're moving to New York this weekend. If you make the right decision, can I see you on Sunday?' He looks hesitant.

'We'll see. Maybe,' I breathe. Momentarily, he looks relieved, then frowns.

'It's cooler now, don't you have a jacket?'

'No.

He shakes his head in irritation and removes his jacket.

'Here. I don't want you to catch a cold.

I blink at him as he holds it open, and as I hold my arms behind me, I remember the time in his office where he slipped my coat over my shoulders - the first time I did. met - and the effect it had on me then. Nothing has changed it's more intense.

His jacket is warm, way too big and it smells good. Oh my... delicious.

My car stops outside. Grayson's mouth opens.

'Is that what you drive?' He is appalled. Taking my hand, he leads me outside. The valet jumps up and hands me my keys, and Grayson coolly gives him some money.

'Does it work?' He's looking at me now.

'Yes.'

'Is this going to happen in New York?'

'Yes she will.'

'Without issue?'

'Yes,' I crack, exasperated. 'Okay, she's old. But she's mine, and she's in working order.

My stepfather bought me. '

'Oh, Naddalin, I think we can do better than that.

'What do you mean?' The realization is emerging. 'You're not buying me a car.'

He looks at me, his jaw strained.

'We'll see,' he said firmly.

9

He grimaces as he opens the driver's door and helps me in. I take off my shoes and roll down the window. He looks at me, his unfathomable expression, his dark eyes.

'Drive carefully,' he said softly.

'Goodbye, Grayson. My voice is hoarse from unsold, unshed tears - jeez, I'm not gonna cry. I give him a small smile.

As I walk away, my chest tightens, my tears start to flow, and I stifle a sob.

Soon tears are streaming down my face, and I don't understand why I am crying. I was holding mine. He explained everything. It was clear. He wants me, but the truth is, I need more. I need him to want me the way I want him and I need him, and deep down I know that is not possible. I'm just overwhelmed.

I don't even know how to categorize it. If I do this thing... will he be my boyfriend?

Will I be able to present it to my friends? Go out to bars, to the cinema, even to the bowling alley, with him? The truth is,

I don't think I will. He won't let me touch him and he won't let me sleep with him. I know I haven't had these things in my past, but I want them in my future.

And- that's not the future he envisions.

And- if I say yes, and in three months he says no, he's had enough of trying to mold me into something I'm not. How am I going to feel? I will have emotionally invested three months, doing things that I'm not sure I want to do. And if he then says no, okay, how could I deal with that level of rejection? Maybe it's best to step back now with the self-esteem that I have reasonably intact.

But the idea of never seeing him again is distressing. How did it get under my skin so quickly? It can't be just sex... I can make the tears flow from my eyes. I don't want to examine my feelings for him. I'm afraid of what I'll find out if I do. What am I going to do?

I- park in front of our duplex. No lights on. Maury must be out. I am relieved. I don't want her to catch me crying again. As I undress, I wake up the nasty machine,

and sitting in my inbox is a message from Grayson.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Tonight

Date: May 25, 2009 10:01 PM

To: Naddalin Black

I- don't understand why you ran tonight. I sincerely hope that all of your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. I know that I have given you a lot to contemplate and I fervently hope that you will give my proposal serious consideration. I want this to work. We're going to take it slow.

Believe me.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Her email makes me cry more. I am not a fusion. I am not an acquisition. Reading this, I might as well be. I don't answer. I don't know what to say to him. I dig through my pajamas and wrap his jacket around me. I climb into my bed. As I

lay there staring in the dark, I think of all the times he warned me to stay away.

'Naddalin, you should get away from me. I am not the man for you.

'I don't do the girlfriend thing.

'I'm not a heart-and-flower guy.

'I'm not making love.

'That's all I know.

...And as I cry silently into my pillow, it's that last idea I cling to. That's all I know too.

Perhaps we can together chart a new course.

Grayson stands above me, grabbing a braided leather whip. He's wearing old, faded, torn Levis and that's it. He slowly slides the crop into his palm as he looks at me. He is smiling, triumphant. I can not move. I am naked and chained, stretched out on a large four-poster bed. Reaching out, he drags the tip of the crop from my forehead down the length of my nose, so I can smell the leather, and over my parted, panting lips.

He pushes the tip into my mouth so I can taste the smooth, rich leather.

'Suck,' he orders in a soft voice. My mouth closes over the tip as I obey.

'Enough,' he snaps.

I'm panting once more as he pulls the crop out of my mouth, drags it down and under my chin, down my neck to the hollow at the base of my throat. He spins it slowly over there, then continues to slide the tip down my body, down my breastbone, between my breasts, down my chest to my belly button. I gasped, squirmed, tugged at my fasteners biting into my wrists and ankles. It swirls the tip around my belly button then continues to drag the leather tip south, through my pubic hair to my clit. He brushes the crop and hits my sweet spot with a loud slap, and I come, gloriously, to cry out for my release.

Suddenly, I wake up, out of breath, covered in sweat, and feeling the aftershocks of my orgasm. Good heavens. I am completely disoriented. What just happened? I am alone in my room. How am I sitting upright, shocked… wow. It is morning. I glance at my alarm clock - eight o'clock. I put my head in my hands. I didn't

know I could dream of sex. Is this something that I ate? Maybe oysters and my internet research manifested in my first wet dream. It is disconcerting. I had no idea that I could have an orgasm while I was sleeping.

Maury walks around the kitchen when I stagger in.

'Naddalin, it's okay. You look weird. Is that Grayson's jacket you're wearing?'

'I'm fine.' Damn, should have checked in the mirror. I avoid his piercing green eyes.

I am still in shock from the event of my morning. 'Yes, it's Grayson's jacket.'

She frowns.

'Did you sleep?

'Not very well.'

I walk over to the kettle. I need some tea.

'How was dinner?'

So-o it starts.

'We had oysters. Followed by cod, so I would say it was fishy.'

'Ugh… I hate oysters, and I don't want to know about food. How was Grayson doing?

What did you talk about?

'He was paying attention,' I stopped.

What can I say? His HIV status is clear, he enjoys role-playing a lot, wants me to obey his every command, hurt someone he tied to his bedroom ceiling and wanted to fuck me in the dining room. private dining. Would that be a good summary? I'm desperately trying to remember something from my meeting with Grayson that I can discuss with Maury.

'He doesn't approve of Wanda.

'Who does, Naddalin, that's old news. Why are you so shy, drop it, girlfriend.

'Oh, Maury, we talked about a lot of things. You know - how difficult he is about food. Besides, he loved your dress.' The kettle has boiled, so I make myself

some tea. 'Would you like some tea, would you like me to hear your speech for today?'

'Yes, please. I worked on it last night at Lilah's. I'll go get it. And yes, I would love some tea.' Maury runs out of the kitchen.

Phew, Mary Smith turned away. I slice a bagel and put it in the toaster. I blush as I remember my vivid dream. What the hell was it?

Last night- like, I had trouble sleeping. My head was buzzing with various options. I am so confused. Grayson's idea of a relationship is more like a job offer. It has set schedules, a job description, and a fairly strict grievance procedure. That's not how I envisioned my first romance - but, of course, Grayson doesn't romance. If I tell him I want more, he can say no... and I could jeopardize what he offered. And that's what worries me the most because I don't want to lose it. But I'm not sure I have the stomach to be his submissive it's the canes and whips that put me off. I am a physical coward and will go far to avoid the pain. I think about my dream... this is what it would look like. My inner goddess is jumping up and down with cheerleader pom-poms screaming yes at me.

Maury returns to the kitchen with his laptop. I focus on my bagel and listen patiently as she goes through her Valedictorian speech.

I'm dressed and ready when Ray arrives. I open the front door and he stands on the porch in his ill-fitting suit. A warm surge of gratitude and love for this uncomplicated man runs through me, and I throw my arms around him in an unusual display of affection. He is taken aback, perplexed.

'Hey, girly, nice to see you too,' he mumbles as he hugs me. Leaning back, his hands on my shoulders, he looks me up and down, frowning. 'Are you alright, kid?

'Of course, dad, can't a girl be happy to see her old man?'

He smiles, his dark eyes narrowed in the corners, and follows me into the living room.

'You look good,' he said.

'It's Maury's dress.' I take a look at the Murray chiffon halterneck dress.

He frowns.

'Where's Maury?

'She's been on campus. She's giving a speech, so she must be early.'

'Should we be heading up?'

'Dad, we have half an hour. Would you like some tea? And you can tell me how everyone in Montesano is getting along. How did it go?'

Ray pulls his car into the campus parking lot, and we follow the stream of humanity dotted with ubiquitous black and red robes, toward the sports auditorium.

'Good luck, girly. You sound terribly nervous, do you have to do something?'

Holy shit... why did Ray choose today to be so observant?

'No, dad. It's a great day.' And I will see it.

'Yeah, my little girl graduated. I'm proud of you, girly.'

'Aw... thank you Ray.' Oh, I love this man.

The sports auditorium is packed. Ray went to sit with the other parents and supporters on the incline bench, as I made my way to my seat. I wear my black dress and cap, and I feel protected by them, anonymous. There's nobody on stage yet, but I can't calm down. My heart is beating and my breathing is shallow. He's here somewhere. I wonder if Maury is talking to him, maybe questioning him.

I walk towards my seat among my fellow students whose names also begin with S. I am in the second row, which allows me even more anoPittsburghmity. I glanced behind me and saw Ray sitting high in the stands. I give him a sign. He consciously gives me a half hello, a half hello in return. I sit down and wait.

The auditorium quickly fills up and the buzz of excited voices gets louder and louder. The row of seats in the front fills up. On either side of me, I'm joined by two girls I don't know from a different faculty. They are close friends and they speak through me with enthusiasm.

At exactly eleven o'clock, the chancellor appears from behind the scene, followed by the three vice-chancellors, then the senior professors, all adorned with their

black and red badges. We stand and applaud our teaching staff. Some teachers nod and bow, others seem bored. Professor Collins, my tutor and my favorite teacher look like he just fell out of bed as usual. The latest on stage are Maury and Grayson. Grayson stands out in his tailored gray suit, copper highlights glistening in his hair under the auditorium lights. He looks so serious and self-sufficient. As he sits down, he undoes his single-breasted jacket and I see his tie. Holy shit... that tie! I rub my wrists reflexively. I can't take my eyes off him - his beauty as distracting as ever - and he's wearing this tie, no doubt on purpose. I can feel my mouth press into a hard line. The audience sits down and the applause ceases.

'Look at him!' One of the girls next to me is breathing enthusiastically at her friend.

'He is beautiful.'

I stiffen. I'm sure they're not talking about Professor Collins.

'It must be Grayson Maury.

'Is he single?

I bristle.

'I don't think so,' I whisper.

'Oh.' The two girls look at me in surprise.

'I think he's gay,' I mumble.

'What a shame,' one of the girls moaned.

As the Chancellor rises and begins the proceedings with his speech, I watch Grayson subtly sweep the room. I sit in my seat, hunching my shoulders, trying to make myself as quiet as possible. I fail miserably as a second later his gray eyes find mine. He stares at me, his face impassive, completely impenetrable. I squirm uncomfortably, mesmerized by his gaze as I feel a slow blush spread across my face. Unconstrained, I remember my dream from this morning, and the muscles in my stomach do the delicious thing of squeezing. I breathe in sharply. I can see the shadow of a smile on his lips, but it's fleeting. He briefly closes his eyes and, opening them, resumes his indifferent expression.

After a glance at the Chancellor, he looks ahead, focusing on the OVHS emblem hanging above the entrance. He no longer

looks at me. The Chancellor continues, and Grayson still isn't looking at me, he's just staring straight ahead.

Why isn't he looking at me? Maybe he changed his mind? A wave of unease came over me. Maybe stepping on him last night was the end for him too. He's tired of waiting for me to make up my mind. Oh no, I could have blown it up completely. I remember his email last night. Maybe he's angry that I didn't respond.

Suddenly- the hall erupts into applause as Miss Mary Smith takes the stage. The Chancellor sits down and Maury throws her beautiful long hair behind her as she places her papers on the desk. She takes her time, not intimidated by a thousand people watching her. She smiles when she's ready, looks up at the enthralled crowd, and launches eloquently into her speech. She is so composed and funny that the girls next to me have a blast at her first joke. Oh, Mary Smith, you can deliver a good line. I feel so proud of her at this point, my wandering thoughts on Grayson are pushed aside. Even though I have heard his speech before, I listen carefully. She controls the room and takes her audience with her.

Its theme is What Next After CollegeOh, what next indeed. Grayson looks at Maury, eyebrows slightly raised - in surprise, I think. Yeah, it could've been Maury going to question him. And it could have been the Maury to whom he was now making indecent offers. Beautiful Maury and beautiful Grayson, together. I could be like the two girls next to me, admiring her from afar. I know Maury wouldn't have told him the time of day.

What did she call him the other day? The thought of a confrontation between Maury and Grayson makes me uncomfortable. I have to say, I don't know where I would put my money.

Maury concludes his speech on a high note, and everyone stands up spontaneously, clapping and clapping, their first standing ovation. I beam and clap at her, and she smiles back at me. Good job, Maury. She sits down, so does the audience, and the Chancellor stands up and introduces Grayson... shit, Grayson is going to make a speech. The Chancellor briefly talks about Grayson's accomplishments: CEO of his own extraordinarily successful company, a truly self-made man.

'And also a major benefactor of our university, please welcome Mr. Grayson Maury.'

The Chancellor pumps Grayson's hand, and there is a wave of polite applause. My heart is in my throat. He approaches the lectern and examines the room. He looks so confident in front of all of us like Maury did before him. The two girls next to me lean in delight. I think most of the female audience members hook up and a few men. He begins, his voice soft, measured, and bewitching.

'I am deeply grateful and touched by the great compliment given to me by the authorities at OVHS today. It offers me a rare opportunity to speak about the impressive work of the Department of Environmental Sciences here at the University. Our objective is to develop through -effective and ecologically sustainable agricultural methods for third world countries; our ultimate goal is to help end hunger and poverty in the world. Over a billion people, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America, live in abject poverty. Agricultural dysfunction is rampant in these parts of the world and the result is ecological and social destruction. I

know what it's like to have a deep hunger. It's a very personal journey for me... '

My jaw drops to the ground. What Grayson was once Hungary. Holy shit. Well, that explains a lot. And I remember the interview; he wants to feed the world. I was racking my brains desperately to remember what Maury had written in his article. Adopted at four, I think. I can't imagine Billie starving him, so it must have been before when he was a little boy. I swallow, my heart tightens at the thought of a hungry toddler with gray eyes.

Oh no. What kind of life did he have before the Maury's seized him and saved him?

I am gripped by a feeling of raw, poor, fucked up, perverted, philanthropic Grayson outrage - although I'm sure he wouldn't see himself that way and repel any thought of sympathy or pity. Suddenly everyone bursts into applause and gets up. I am good that I did not hear half of his speech. He does all of these good deeds, runs a huge business, and sues me at the same time. It is overwhelming. I remember brief excerpts from conversations he had about Darfur... everything falls into place. Food.

He smiles briefly under the warm applause - Evan Maury clamps, then he resumes his seat. He's not looking my way, and I'm shifted trying to assimilate this new information about him.

One of the vice-chancellors stands up and we begin the long and tedious process of collecting our diplomas. There are over four hundred to give out, and it takes a little over an hour before I hear my name. I go on stage between the two laughing girls.

Grayson looks at me, his gaze warm but reserved.

'Congratulations, Miss Black,' he said as he squeezed my hand, squeezing it gently. I feel a load of his flesh on mine. 'Are you having a problem with your laptop?'

I frown as he hands me my diploma.

'No.'

'So, you are ignoring my emails?'

'I only saw mergers and acquisitions.'

He looks at me questioningly.

'Later,' he said, and I have to move on because I hold the line.

I return to my place. He must have sent another. What does that say?

The ceremony takes another hour to conclude. It is interminable. Finally, the Chancellor leads the faculty members off the stage to even more enthusiastic applause, preceded by Grayson and Maury. Grayson doesn't look at me, even though I want him to.

My inner goddess is not happy.

As I get up and wait for our argument to dissipate, Maury calls me. She walks up to me from behind the stage.

'Grayson wants to talk to you,' she shouts. The two girls who are now standing next to me turn and eclipse me.

'He sent me here,' she continues.

Oh...

'Your speech was great, Maury.'

'It was, wasn't it?' she shines. 'You come, he can be very pushy.' She rolls her eyes and I smile.

'You have no idea. I can't leave Ray for long.' I glance at Ray and hold my fingers to indicate five minutes. He nods, nodding to me, and I'm murmuring in the hallway behind the stage. Grayson speaks with the Chancellor and two members of the teaching staff. He looks up when he sees me.

'Excuse me, gentlemen,' I hear him whisper. He comes over to me and smiles briefly at Maury.

'Thank you,' he says, and before she can answer he takes my elbow and leads me into what looks like a men's locker room. He checks to see if it's empty, then he locks the door. Holy shit, what's on his mind, I watch him as he turns on me.

'Why didn't you email me or text me back?' He glared at him. I am confused.

'I haven't looked at my computer today, nor my phone.' Damn, did he try to call? I try my distraction technique which is so effective on Maury. 'It was a great speech.'

'Thank you.

'Explain to me your food problems.'

He runs a hand through his hair, exasperated.

'Naddalin, I don't want to go right now.' He closes his eyes, looking pained.

'I was worried about you.'

'Worried, why?'

'Because, you got home in that death trap, you call a car.'

'It's not a death trap. It's fine. Sam serves it to me regularly.'

'Sam, the photographer?' Grayson's eyes narrowed, his face frozen. Oh shit.

'Yes, the beetle belonged to its mother.'

'Yes, and probably her mother and mother before her. I'm not sure.'

'I've been driving it for over three years. I'm sorry you worried. Why didn't you call?' Jeez, he's reacting completely.

He takes a deep breath.

'Naddalin, I need an answer from you. This wait is driving me crazy.'

'Grayson, I… look, I left my stepfather alone.'

'Tomorrow. I want an answer by tomorrow.'

'Ok. Tomorrow I will tell you then.' I blink at him.

He pulls back, looks at me coldly, and his shoulders relax.

'Are you staying for a drink?' He asks.

'I don't know what Ray wants to do.'

'Your stepfather, I would like to meet him.'

Oh no, why?

'I'm not sure that's a good idea.'

Grayson unlocks the door, his mouth in a sinister line.

'Are you ashamed of me?'

'No!' It's my turn to sound exasperated. 'Introduce yourself to my dad

like this is the man who deflowered me and wants us to start a BDSM relationship. You don't wear running shoes.'

Grayson looks at me, then his lips twist into a smile. And even though I'm angry with him, my face is involuntarily drawn to a response smile.

'Just so you know, I can run pretty fast. Just tell her I'm your friend, Naddalin.'

He opens the door and I go out. My mind is spinning. The Chancellor, the three Vice-Chancellors, four professors, and Maury watch me as I hurriedly pass. Holy shit. When I leave Grayson with the faculty, I go in search of Ray.

Tell him I'm your friend. Friend with benefits, my subconscious scowls. I know I know. I shake off that nasty thought. How am I going to introduce Ray to her? The room is still at least half full and Ray hasn't moved from his seat. He sees me, signals me, and goes downstairs.

'Hey, girly. Congratulations.' He puts his arm around me.

'Would you like to come and have a drink under the marquee?'

'Sure. It's your day. Show the way.'

'We don't have to do it if you don't want to.' Please say no...

'I just sat for two and a half hours listening to all kinds of chatter. I need a drink.'

I put my arm in his, and we walked around with the crowd in the early afternoon heat. We cross the line for the official photographer.

'Oh, that reminds me.' Ray takes a digital camera from his pocket. 'One for the album, girly.' I roll my eyes at him as he takes a picture of me.

'Can I take off the cap and the dress now, I'm feeling a little bit silly.'

You sound a little silly... my subconscious is at its best. So, are you going to introduce Ray to the man you're fucking? She looks at me over her wing-shaped glasses. He would be so proud. God, I hate her sometimes.

The marquee is huge and crowded - students, parents, teachers, and friends all chatting happily. Ray hands me a glass of champagne or some cheap sparkling wine, I

guess. It is not fresh and it tastes sweet. My thoughts turn to Grayson... he won't like it.

'Naddalin! I turn around and Paul Smith hugs me. It makes me spin around, without spilling my wine, a feat.

'Congratulations!' He beams at me, his green eyes twinkling.

What a surprise. Her dirty blonde hair was tousled and sexy. He's as handsome as Maury. The family resemblance is striking.

'Wow - Paul! Nice to see you. Dad, this is Paul, Maury's brother. Paul, this is my dad, Ray Black.' They shake hands, my father coolly assessing Mr. Smith.

'When did you come back from Europe?' I ask.

'I've been back for a week, but I wanted to surprise my little sister, ' he said conspiratorially.

'This is so cute.' I smile at him.

'She's Valedictorian, couldn't miss that.' He looks immensely proud of his sister.

'She gave an excellent speech.'

'That's what she did,' Ray nods.

Paul has his arm around my waist as I gaze into Grayson Maury's frosty gray eyes. Maury is next to him.

'Hello, Ray,' Maury kisses Ray on both cheeks, making him blush. 'Have you met Naddalin's boyfriend Grayson Murray?' Holy shit… Maury! Shit! All the blood is flowing from my face. 'Mr. Black, it's a pleasure to meet you.' Grayson said softly, warmly, completely unfazed by Maury's introduction. He holds out his hand, which, to Ray's credit, Ray takes, not showing the slightest surprise he just gave him. Thank you very much, Mary Smith, I smoke. I think my subconscious has passed out. 'Mr. Maury, 'Ray murmurs, his expression indecipherable except perhaps the slight widening of his large brown eyes. They slide across my face with a when-you-were-going-to-give-me-this-news look. I bite my lip. 'And this is my brother, Paul Smith.'

Maury said to Grayson. Grayson turns his arctic gaze on Paul, who still has an arm around me. 'Mr. Smith.' They shake hands. Grayson holds out his hand to me. 'Naddalin, baby,' he whispers, and I almost breathe out at the end. I step out of Paul's reach, while Grayson smiles at him coldly,

and I take my place next to him. Maury smiles at me. She knows exactly what she's doing, the vixen! 'Paul, mum and dad wanted a word.' Maury drags Paul away. 'So how long have the children known each other?' Ray looks at me impassively from Grayson. The power of speech has abandoned me. I want the ground to swallow me up. Grayson puts his arm around me, his thumb brushing my bareback in a caress before his hand squeezes my shoulder. 'About a few weeks now,' he said softly. 'We met when Naddalin came to interview me for the student magazine.' 'I didn't know you were working on the student magazine, Naddalin. Ray's voice is a quiet warning, revealing his irritation.

Shit. 'Maury was sick,' I whispered. That's all I can do to make it happen. 'Nice speech you made, Mr. Maury.' 'Thank you, sir. I understand that you are an avid fisherman.' Ray raises his eyebrows and smiles - a rare, genuine, genuine smile from Ray Black - and off we go, speaking of fish. I quickly feel surplus to needs. He charmed my father's pants... as he did you, my subconscious cracks me. Its power knows no bounds. I apologize for going to find Maury. She talks to her parents, who are

always so charming and who greet me warmly. We exchange brief jokes, mostly about their upcoming Barbados vacation and our move. 'Maury, how could you put me on Ray?' I whistle at the first opportunity, we will not be heard. 'Because I knew you never would, and I want to help with Grayson's engagement issues.'

Maury smiles sweetly at me. I frown. I'm the one who won't engage with him, idiot! 'He looks very cool about it, Naddalin. Don't worry. Look at him now - Grayson can't take his eyes off you.' I look up and Ray and Grayson look at me. 'He looked at you like a hawk.' 'I'd better go save Ray or Grayson.' I don't know which ones. You didn't hear the last time, Mary Smith! I stare at her. 'Naddalin, I've done you a favor,' she calls me. 'Hi.' I smile at them on my return. They look good. Grayson enjoys a private joke, and my dad looks incredibly relaxed considering he's in a social situation. What did they discuss besides the 'Naddalin, where's the toilet?' 'Back off in front of the marquee and to the left.' 'See you soon. You kids have fun.' Ray exits. I look nervously at Grayson. We stop briefly as a photographer takes a photo of the two of us. 'Thanks, Mr. Maury. The photographer leaves. I blink from the flash.

'So you charmed my father too?' 'As well as?' Grayson's gray eyes burn and he raises a questioning eyebrow. I rinse. He raises his hand and traces my cheek with his fingers. 'Oh, I wish I knew what you were thinking, Naddalin,' he whispered darkly, cupping my chin and lifting our heads so that we were looking intently in each other's eyes. My breathing is blocked. How can he have that effect on me, even in this crowded tent? 'Right now, I think, pretty tie,' I breathe. He's laughing. 'It recently became my favorite.' I blush scarlet. 'You look lovely, Naddalin, that halter dress looks good on you, and I can stroke your back, feel your beautiful skin.' Suddenly, it's like we're alone in the room. Just the two of us, my whole body came alive, each nerve ending singing softly, this electricity pulling me towards it, charging between us.

'You know it's gonna be good, don't you, baby?' he whispers. I close my eyes as my insides unwind and melt. 'But I want more,' I whisper. 'After?' he looks at me puzzled, his eyes darkening. I nod and swallow. Now he knows. 'More,' he repeats softly. Test the Word - a simple little word, but full of promise. His thumb traces my lower lip. 'You want hearts and flowers.' I

nod my head again. He blinks at me, and I watch his internal struggle play in his eyes. 'Naddalin. Her voice is soft. 'It's not something that I know.' 'Me neither.' He smiles slightly. 'You don't know much,' he whispers. 'You know all the wrong things.' 'Wrong, not for me.' He shakes his head. He looks so sincere. 'Try it,' he whispers. A challenge that challenges me and he tilts his head to the side and smiles his twisted, dazzling smile. I'm gasping, and I'm Eve in the Garden of Eden, and it's the serpent, and I can't resist. 'Alright,' I whisper. 'What?' I have his undivided attention. I swallow. 'OK, I will try.' 'You agree?' His disbelief is evident. 'Subject to soft limits, yes. I'll try.'

My voice is so small. Grayson closes his eyes and hugs me. 'Jesus, Naddalinh, you are so unexpected. You take my breath away. He steps back, and suddenly Ray comes back, and the volume of the marquee gradually goes up and fills my ears. We are not alone. Holy shit, I just agreed to be his sub. Grayson smiles at Ray and his eyes dance with joy. 'girly, should we have lunch?' 'Okay.' I blink at Ray, trying to find my balance. What have you done? My subconscious screams at me. My inner goddess does back flips in a routine

worthy of a Russian Olympic gymnast. 'Would you like to join us, Grayson?' Ray asks. Grayson! I stare at him, imploring him to refuse. I need space to think... What have I done? 'Thanks, Mr. Black, but I have plans. It was great to meet you, sir. 'Likewise,' Ray replies. 'Take care of my little girl.'

'Oh, I have every intention of doing it, Mr. Black.' They shake hands. I feel sick. Ray has no idea how Grayson intends to deal with me. Grayson takes my hand and brings it to his lips and tenderly kisses my knuckles, his burning eyes fixed on mine. 'Later, Miss Black,' he breathes, his voice full of promise. My stomach curls up at the thought... oh Dear. Wait... later? Ray takes my elbow and leads me to the entrance of the tent. 'Sounds like a tough young man. Well-off too. You could do a lot worse, girly. But why did I have to hear about him from Maury,' he snarls.

I shrug my shoulders to apologize. 'Well, any man who loves and knows his fly fishing agrees with me.' Sacred Cow - Ray approves. If only he knew. Ray takes me home at dusk. 'Call your mom,' he said. 'I will. Thanks for coming, dad.' 'I wouldn't have missed it for the world, girly. You

make me so proud.' Oh no. I'm not going to get emotional. A huge lump forms in my throat and I hug him tight. He puts his arms around me, puzzled, and I can't help myself - tears are rolling in my eyes. 'Hey, girly, honey,' Ray croons. 'Big old day... eh would you like me to come make you some tea?' I laugh, despite my tears. Tea is always the answer according to Ray. I remember my mom complaining about him, saying that when it came to tea and sympathy he was always good at tea, not so keen on sympathy. 'No, dad, I'm fine. It's been so great seeing you. I'll be back very soon once I get settled in New York.'

'Good luck with the interviews. Tell me how they're going.' 'Of course, dad.' 'I love you, girly.' 'I love you too, daddy.' He smiles, his warm brown eyes shining, and he gets back into his car. I wave for him to leave as he heads into the twilight, and I walk quietly into the apartment. The first thing I do is check my cell phone. It needs to be recharged, so I have to find the charger and plug it in before I can retrieve my messages. Four missed calls, one voice message, and two SMS. Three missed calls from Grayson... no messages. A missed call from Sam and a voicemail from him wishing me the best for graduation. I open the texts.

~ Are you safe at home ~

~ Call me ~

They're both from Grayson, why hasn't he called home? I walk to my room and turn on the nasty machine. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Tonight Date: May 25, 2009, 11:58 PM To Naddalin Black Hope you got home in your car. Let me know if you are okay. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Jeez... why is he so worried about my Beetle. It has given me three years of loyal service, and Sam has always been there to keep it going for me. Grayson's next email is today. From: Grayson Murray Subject:

Soft Limits Date: May 26, 2009, 5:22 PM To Naddalin Black What can I say that I haven't already? Happy to talk about Pittsburgh time. You were beautiful today. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. I want to see it. I hit the answer

From: Naddalin Black Subject: Soft Limits Date: May 26, 2009, 7:23 PM To Grayson Murray I can come over tonight to chat if you like. Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: Soft Limits Date: May 26, 2009, 7:27 PM To Naddalin Black I'll come

to you. I meant it when I said I wasn't happy you were driving this car. I'll be with you shortly. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Holy shit... he's coming now. I have to prepare one thing for him: the first edition of Thomas Hardy's books is still on the shelves in the living room. I can't keep them. I wrap them in brown paper and scribble on the wrapper a direct quote from Tess from the book:

'Hi.' I feel unbearably shy when I open the door. Grayson is standing on the porch in his jeans and leather jacket.

'Hi,' he says, and his face lights up with his beaming smile. I take a moment to admire the pretty. Oh my gosh, it's hot in leather.

'Come in.'

'If I can,' he said amused. He raises a bottle of champagne as he enters. 'I thought we were going to celebrate your graduation. Nothing beats a good Bollinger.'

'Interesting choice of words,' I comment dryly.

He smiles.

'Oh, I like your mind ready, Naddalin.'

'We only have tea cups. We've packed all the glasses.'

'Teacups look good to me.'

I head for the kitchen. Nervous, butterflies flooding my stomach, it's like having an unpredictable, predatory panther or mountain lion in my living room.

'Do you want saucers too?'

'The teacups will be fine, Naddalin,' Grayson calls absently from the living room.

When I come back, he looks at the brown bundle of books. I place the cups on the table.

'It's for you,' I whisper anxiously.

Damn... it's probably going to be a fight.

'Hmm, I thought so. Very apt quote.' His long index finger absently traces the writing. 'I thought I was D'Urberville, not Angel. You decided to debase him.' He gives me a brief wolf smile. 'Trust yourself to find something that resonates so well.'

'It's also a plea,' I whisper. Why am I so nervous? My mouth is dry.

'A plea for me to go easy with me?'

I agree.

'I bought them for you,' he said softly, his gaze unmoved. 'I will go with you more easily if you accept them.

I swallow convulsively.

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'Grayson, I can't accept them, they're just too many.'

'See, that's what I was talking about, you challenge me. I want you to have them, and that's the end of the discussion. It's very simple. You don't have to think about that.

As a submissive, you would just be grateful to them. You just accept what I buy from you because I like it for you to do it. '

'I wasn't submissive when you bought them for me,' I whisper.

'No... but you accepted, Naddalin.' His eyes were wary.

I sigh. I'm not going to win this, so on to Plan B.

'So? they are mine to do with what I want 'them eyes, he is suspicious of me, but concedes.

' Yes. '

'In that case, I would like to donate them to a charity, which works in Darfur, because it is important to you. They can auction them off. '

'If that's what you want to do.' Her mouth takes a hard line. He is disappointed.

I'm blushing.

'I'll think about it,' I whisper, I don't want to disappoint him, and his words come back to me. I want you to want to please me.

'Don't think so, Naddalin. Not about that.' Her tone is calm and serious.

How not to think? You can pretend to be a car, like its other possessions, my subconscious makes an unwanted vitriolic return. I do not know. Oh, can't we go back? The atmosphere between us is now

tense. I do not know what to do. I look at my fingers.

How to recover from this situation?

He puts the bottle of champagne on the table and stands in front of me. Putting his hand under my chin, he tilts my head up. He looks at me, his expression was serious.

'I'll buy you a lot of things, Naddalin. Get used to it. I can afford it. I am a very rich man. He leans in and plants a quick, chaste kiss on my lips. 'Please.' He frees me.

'Ho' my subconscious mouth looks at me.

'It makes me feel cheap,' I whisper.

Grayson runs his hand through his hair, exasperated.

'It shouldn't. You think about it too much, Naddalin. Don't make a vague moral judgment based on what others might think. Don't waste your energy. It's only because you have reservations about our arrangement, it's perfectly natural. You don't know what you're getting yourself into. '

I frown, trying to understand his words.

'Hey, stop that,' he orders softly, cupping the chin again and pulling on it gently so that I free my lower lip from my teeth. 'There's nothing about you that's cheap, Naddalin.

I won't make you think of that. I just bought you some old books that I thought might mean something to you, that's all. Have some champagne. Her eyes warm and soften, and I smile shyly at her. 'It's better,' he whispers. He picks up the champagne, removes the top and the aluminum cage, twists the bottle rather than the cork, and opens it with a little pop and a practiced flourish that doesn't spill a drop. He half-filled the cups.

'It's pink,' I whisper, surprised.

'Bollinger Grande Annee Rose 1999, an excellent vintage,' he says with delight.

'In tea cups.'

He smiles.

'In teacups. Congratulations on your graduation, Naddalin.' We clink

goblets and he takes a drink, but I can't help but think that this is my surrender.

'Thanks,' I whisper and take a sip. Of course, it's delicious. 'Are we going to cross the soft lines?'

He smiles and I blush.

'Always so impatient.' Grayson takes my hand and leads me to the couch where he is sitting and pulls me next to him.

'You are a stepfather, a very taciturn man.

Oh... no soft limits then. I just want to eliminate this; anxiety gnaws at me.

'You get that fact of having it eat out of hand. I pout.

Grayson laughed softly.

'Only because I can fish.'

'How do you know he liked to fish?'

'You told me. When we went for coffee.

'Oh... did I do it?' I take another sip. Wow, he has a memory for the details.

Hmm... this champagne is very good. 'Have you tried the wine at the reception?'

Grayson grimaces.

'Yes. It was horrible.'

'I thought of you when I tasted it. How could you have been so knowledgeable about wine?'

'I don't know, Naddalin, I just know what I like.' His gray eyes glow, almost silver, and it makes me blush. 'A bit more?' he asks, referring to the champagne.

'Please.'

Grayson stands up Billie fully and retrieves the bottle. He fills my cup. Does he make me drunk, I looked at him suspiciously.

'This place looks pretty sparse, are you ready to move?'

'More or less.'

'Are you working tomorrow?'

'Yes, my last day at Eastwood's'

'I'll help you move, but I promised to meet my sister at the airport.'

Oh... this is news.

'Mia arrives from Paris very early Saturday morning. I'm heading back to New York tomorrow, but I hear Jack giving you a hand.'

'Yeah, Maury is very excited about it.'

Grayson frowns.

'Yeah, Maury and Jack, who would have thought?' he whispers, and for some reason, he doesn't look happy.

'So what are you doing for your job in New York?'

When are we going to talk about limits? What is his game?

'I have a few interviews for internships.'

'When were you going to tell me that?' He arched an eyebrow.

'Uh... I'm telling you now.'

He narrows his eyes.

'Or?'

For some reason, maybe because he could use his influence, I don't want to tell him.

'A few publishing houses.'

'Is that what you wanna do, something in the edit?'

I nod suspiciously.

'Good?' He looks at me patiently, wanting more information.

'Well what?'

'Don't be obtuse, Naddalin, which publishing houses?' He growls.

'Just little ones,' I whisper.

'Why don't you want me to know?'

'Undue influence.'

He frowns.

'Oh, now you're obtuse.'

He's laughing.

'Obtuse Me God, you challenge. Drink, let's talk about these limits.' He's fishing for another copy of my email and the list. Does he walk around with these lists in

his pockets? I think there is one in his jacket that I have. Damn, I'd better not forget that. I empty my cup.

He looks at me quickly.

'After?'

'Please.'

He smiles his blissful and intimate smile, holds the bottle of champagne, and stops.

'Did you eat any?’

Oh no... not that old chestnut.

'Yes. I had a three course meal with Ray.' I roll my eyes at him. Champagne makes me daring.

He leans forward and holds my chin, staring me in the eye.

'The next time you roll your eyes at me, I'll take you on my knee.'

What?

'Oh,' I breathe and I can see the excitement in his eyes.

'Oh,' he replies, mirroring my tone. 'So it starts, Naddalin.

My heart slams against my chest and butterflies escape from my stomach into my tight throat. Why is it hot?

He fills my cup and I drink almost everything. Chastised, I look at him.

'You have your attention now, don't you?'

I agree.

'Answer me.'

'Yes... you have my attention.'

'Good,' he smirked knowingly. 'So sex acts. We did most of that.'

I walk over to him on the couch and look at the list.

APPENDIX

- Soft limits
- To be discussed and agreed between the two parties:
- Which of the following sexual acts are acceptable to the Bidder?
- Masturbation
- Blowjob
- Cunnilingus
- Investigate in touching
- vaginal squirting sex

- Anal reaming
- Anal/Butt
- Blowing cum all over your body and you mine

'No fisting, you say. Is there anything else you object to?' He asks softly.

I swallow and roll it around some before in my mouth.

'Butt sex doesn't exactly float my boat.'

'I will accept the fisting, but I would like to claim your ass, Naddalin.' But we will wait for that. Plus, it's not something we can dive into, 'he smiles at me. 'Your ass will need training.'

'Training?' I whisper.

'Oh yes. It will take careful preparation.anal sex can be very pleasurable, trust me. But if we try and you don't like it, we don't have to do it again.' He smiles at me. I blinked at him. He thinks I'm going to enjoy it. How does he know it's nice?

'Did you do this?' I whisper.

'Yes.'

Holy shit. I gasp.

'With a man?'

'No. I've never slept with a man. Not my scene.'

'Mrs. MLF stifflers mom?'

'Yes.'

Holy shit... how I frown. It moves to the bottom of the list.

'Okay… swallow sperm. Well you get an A in there.'

I blush, and my inner goddess smacks her lips together with pride.

'Therefore.' He looks at me smiling. 'Swallow semen, okay?'

I nod, unable to look him in the eye, and drain my cup again.

'After?' He asks.

'After.' And I suddenly remember our conversation earlier in the day as he refilled my cup. Is he referring to that or just champagne?

'Sex toys? He asks.

I shrug my shoulders, going through the list.

Is the use of sex toys acceptable for the submissive?

1. Vibrators
2. Dildos
3. Butt Plugs
4. Other

'anal plug doing what it says on the box?' I crinkle my nose in disgust.

'Yes,' he smiles. 'And I'm referring to anal sex above. Training.'

'Oh… what's in another one?'

'Pearls, eggs... that kind of stuff.

'Eggs?' I am alarmed.

'No real eggs, ' he laughed loudly, shaking his head.

I tighten her lips.

'I'm glad you find me funny.' I can't keep my hurt feelings out of my voice.

He stops laughing.

'I'm sorry. Miss Black, I'm sorry,' he said, trying to sound contrite, but his

eyes still dance with humor. 'A problem with the toys?'

'No,' I say dryly.

'Naddalin,' he coaxes. 'I'm sorry. Believe me. I don't mean to laugh. I've never had this conversation in such detail. You are so inexperienced. I'm sorry.' His eyes are large, gray, and sincere.

I thaw a bit and take another sip of champagne.

'Right - bondage,' he said, returning to the list. I examine the list and my inner goddess bounces up and down like a little child was handcuffs/metal.

1. Is bondage acceptable to the submissive?
2. Hands in front Hands behind back
3. Ankles Knees
4. Elbows
5. Ankle cuff
6. Spreader bars
7. Attached to furniture
8. Bandage
9. Sex swing
10. gagging eyes
11. Bondage with rope

12. Bondage with tape
13. Pole dancing
14. Bondage with leather cuffs
15. Suspension
16. Bondage with handcuffs/metal ties
17. Fuck machine.

'We talked about the suspension. And that's fine if you want to define that as a hard limit. It takes a long time, and I only have you for short periods anyway. Pittsburgh? ' Don't laugh at me, but what is a spreader bar? ' 'I promise not to laugh. I apologized twice.' He looks at me. 'Don't force me to start over,' he warns. And I think I'm visibly shrinking... oh, he's so bossy. 'A retractor is a bar with cuffs for the ankles and/or wrists. They're fun.' 'Okay... and gag me well. I would be afraid I couldn't breathe.'

'I would be worried if you couldn't breathe. I don't want to suffocate you.

'And how can I use safe words if I am gagged?'

He pauses.

'First of all, I hope you never have to use them. But if you're gagged we'll use hand signals,' he said simply.

I blinked at him. But if I'm tied up, how will it work? My brain is starting to fog up... hmm alcohol.

'I'm nervous about the gagging.'

'Okay. I'll take note.'

I look at him, the realization is emerging.

'Do you like to tie up your submissives so they can't touch you?'

He looks at me, his eyes wide.

'That's one of the reasons,' he said calmly.

'Is that why you tied my hands?'

'Yes.'

'You don't like to talk about it,' I whisper.

'No, I don't. Would you like another drink? It makes you brave, and I need to know how you feel about the pain.'

Holy shit... This is the tricky part. He refills my cup of tea and I sip.

'So, what's your general attitude to pain?' Grayson looks at me impatiently

'You bite your lip,' he said darkly.

I stop immediately, but I don't know what to say. I blush and look at my hands.

'Were you physically punished as a child?'

'No.'

'So you have no sphere of reference?'

'No.'

'It's not as bad as you might think. Your imagination is your worst enemy in all of this,' he whispers.

'You have to do it?

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Go with the land, Naddalin. That's what I do. I can see you're nervous. Let's review the methods.

He shows me the list. My subconscious runs, screams, and hides behind the sofa.

1. Spanking
2. Paddle
3. Whipping
4. Caning
5. Biting
6. Nipple clamps
7. Genital clamps
8. Genital Piercings
9. Ice cream
10. Hot wax
11. Other types/methods of pain
12. Live cam shows

'Well, you said no to genital clamps. Very good. What hurts me from the blows of the stick the most. '

I bleach.

'We can work on it.'

'Or don't at all,' I whisper.

'It's part of the deal, baby, but we'll work on this. Naddalin, I'm not going to push you too far.'

'This punishment thing worries me the most.' My voice is very small.

'Well, I'm glad you told me. We'll keep crossing the list for now. And as you get more comfortable with this stuff, we'll turn up the intensity. We're going to go for it. slowly.'

I swallow, and he leans forward and kisses me on my lips.

'There wasn't that bad, was it?

I shrug my heart in my mouth again.

'Look, I want to talk about one more thing, so I'll take you to bed.'

'Bed?' I blink quickly and my blood beats around my body, warming places I didn't know existed until very recently.

'Come on, Naddalin, speaking of all this, I want to fuck you next week now. It must have an effect on you too.'

I squirm. My inner goddess is panting.

'See Beside, there is something I want to try.’

'Something painful?'

'No - stop seeing pain everywhere.' It's mostly fun. Have I ever hurt you?

I rinse.

'No.'

'Well. Look, earlier today you were talking about wanting more,' he stops, suddenly uncertain.

Oh my... where is it going?

He shakes my hand.

'Outside of the time you're my sub, maybe we can try.' I don't know if it will work.

I don't know how to separate it all. It may not work. But I am ready to try. Maybe one night a week. I do not know. '

Holy cow... my mouth opens, my subconscious is in shock, Grayson Maury is ready for more! He's ready to try! My subconscious burst out from behind the couch, still registering a shock on his harpy face.

'I have a condition.' He looks suspiciously at my stunned expression.

'What?' I breathe. Whatever. I'll give you anything.

'You graciously accept my graduation gift.

'Oh.' And deep down I know what it is. Fright arises in my stomach.

He stares at me, gauging my reaction.

'Come on,' he whispers and stands up, dragging me up. Takes off his jacket, drapes it over my shoulders, and heads for the door.

A red hatchback is parked outside, a two-door compact Audi.

'It's for you. Happy graduation,' he whispered as he pulled me into his arms and kissed my hair.

He bought me a goddamn car, brand new in appearance. Damn... I've had enough trouble with the books. I look at him blankly, desperately trying to figure out how I feel about it. I'm appalled on one level, grateful on another, shocked that he did, but the dominant emotion is anger. Yeah, I'm angry, especially after everything I've told him about the books... but he had

already bought this. Taking my hand, he leads me on the path of this new acquisition.

'Naddalin, your Beetle is old and downright dangerous. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you when it's so easy for me to do things right, 'he pauses. His eyes are on me, but right now I can't bring myself to look at him. I stand silently looking at her formidable bright red novelty.

'I told your father-in-law about it. He totally agreed,' he whispers.

Turning around, I stare at him, my mouth open in horror.

'You told Ray about it. How could you? I can barely spit out the words. How dare he, Poor Ray. I feel bad, mortified for my father.

'It's a gift, Naddalin. Can't you just say thank you?'

'But you know it's too much.'

'Not for me it's not, not for my peace of mind.'

I frown, not knowing what to say. He just doesn't understand! He's had money his whole life.

Okay, not his whole life - not as a little kid - and my worldview changes. The thought is very disappointing, and I soften towards the car, feeling guilty about my spike. His intentions are good, misguided, but not from a bad place.

'Glad you loaned me this, like the laptop.'

He sighs deeply.

'Okay. On loan. Indefinitely.' He looks at me suspiciously.

'No, not indefinitely, but for now. Thank you.'

He frowns. I reach out and kiss her briefly on her cheek.

'Thanks for the car, sir.' I say as nicely as I can, I do.

He suddenly grabs me and pulls me against him, one hand on my back holding me against him and the other fisting through my hair.

'You are a stimulating woman, Naddalin Black.' He kisses me passionately, forcing my lips to part with his tongue, taking no prisoners.

My blood heats up immediately and I return his kiss to him with my passion. I want it badly - despite the car, the books, the soft limits... the caning... I want it.

'It takes all of my self-control not to fuck you on the hood of that car right now, just to show you that you're mine, and if I want to buy you a fucking car, I'll buy you a fucking car, 'he growls. 'Now we're going to get you inside and naked.' He plants me a quick, brutal kiss.

Boy, he's angry. He grabs my hand and leads me back to the apartment and straight to my room... no way through. My subconscious is behind the sofa again, my head hidden under its hands. He turns on the nightlight and stops staring at me.

'Please don't be mad at me,' I whisper.

His gaze is impassive; her cold gray eyes shards of smoked glass.

'I'm sorry about the car and the books,' I stop. He remains silent and dark.

'You scare me when you're angry,' I breathe, staring at him.

He closes his eyes and shakes his head. When he opens them, his expression softens slightly. He takes a deep breath and swallows.

'Turn around,' he whispers. 'I want to get you out of this dress.'

Another mercurial mood jump that's so hard to keep up with. Obediently, I turn, and my heartbeats, desire instantly replacing uneasiness, streaming through my blood and settling in darkness and desire low, low in my stomach. He picks up my hair from my back so that it hangs over my right side, curling over my chest. He places his index finger on the nape of my neck and slowly slides it down my spine. Her well-groomed nail gently brushes my back.

'I love this dress,' he whispers. 'I love to see your flawless skin.'

His finger reaches the back of my halter dress in the middle of my spine, and hooking his finger under the top, he pulls me closer so that I step back against him. I

feel it flush against my body. Bending down, he inhales my hair.

'You smell so good, Naddalin. So sweet.' His nose brushes my ear along my neck, and he trails soft, light kisses down my shoulder.

My breathing changes, becoming shallow, rushed, full of expectation. His fingers are on my zipper. Painfully slowly, once again, he relieves him as his lips move, licking, kissing, and sucking on my other shoulder. He's so good at it. My body resonates and I begin to squirm languidly under his touch.

'You. Go. Go. Have. To. Learn. To. Keep. Stay.' He whispers, kissing me around the back of my neck between each word.

He pulls on the tie at the halter neck, and the dress falls and puffs up at my feet.

'No bra, Miss Black. I like it.'

Her hands reach around and wrap around my breasts, and my nipples curl up against her.

'Lift your arms and put them around my head,' he whispers against my neck.

I obey immediately, and my breasts lift and push in his hands, my nipples hardening further. My fingers dig into her hair, and very gently I pull her soft, sexy hair. I roll my head to one side to give it easier access to my neck.

'Mmm…' he whispers into that space behind my ear, as he begins to extend my nipples with his long fingers, reflecting my hands in his hair.

I moan as the sensation registers crisp and clear in my groin.

'Shall I bring you over here?' He whispers.

I arch my back to force my breasts into his expert hands.

'You like it, don't you, Miss Black?'

'Mmm…'

'Tell me.' He continues the slow sensual torture, pulling gently.

'Yes.'

'Yes what.'

'Yes sir.'

'Good girl.' He squeezes me hard and my body twists convulsively against his forehead.

I gasp at the exquisite, shrill, pleasure/pain. I feel it against me. I moan and my hands tighten in her hair pulling harder.

'I don't think you're ready to come yet,' he whispers, stealing his hands, and he gently bites my earlobe and pulls it. 'Besides, I didn't like you.

Oh... no, what does that mean? My brain registers through the haze of needy desire as I moan.

'So maybe- I won't let you come after all.' He returns the attention of his fingers to my nipples, pulling, twisting, kneading. I grind my behind against him... moving from side to side.

I feel his smile against my neck as his hands move down to my hips. His fingers hook into my panties at the back, stretching them out, and he pushes his thumbs through the fabric, shredding them

and throwing them in front of me so I can see… holy shit. His hands descend to my cock... and from behind, he slowly inserts his finger.

'Oh, yeah. My sweet girl is all set,' he hisses, spinning me around to face him. His breathing quickened. He puts his finger in his mouth. 'You taste so good, Miss Black.' He sighs. 'Undress me,' he orders softly, looking at me, hooded eyes.

All I wear are my shoes, well, Maury's high heels. I am taken aback. I have never undressed a man.

'You can do it,' he coaxes softly.

Oh my. I blink quickly. Where to start I pick up his shirt, he grabs my hands and shakes his head, smiling slyly at me.

'Oh no.' He shakes his head, smiling. 'Not the t-shirt, you may have to touch me for what I planned.' Her eyes are filled with excitement.

Oh… this is news... I can touch clothes. He takes one of my hands and places it against his erection.

'This is the effect you have on me, Miss Black.'

I gasp and curl my fingers around his circumference, and he smiles.

'I want to be inside of you. Take off my jeans. You're in charge.'

Holy shit... I in charge. My mouth opens.

'What are you going to do with me?' He teases.

Oh the possibilities... my inner goddess roars, and from somewhere born of Black's frustration, need, and sheer bravery, I push him onto the bed. He laughs as he falls and I watch him feeling victorious. My inner goddess is going to explode. I tear off her shoes, quickly, awkwardly, and her socks. He looks at me, his eyes bright with amusement and desire. He looks... glorious... mine. I climb onto the bed and sit astride him to undo his jeans, sliding my fingers under the belt, feeling the hair in his happy trail. He closes his eyes and flexes his hips.

'You're going to have to learn to be still,' I snarled and pulled the hair under his belt.

His breathing stops and he smiles at me.

'Yes, Miss Black,' he whispers, his eyes shining. 'In my pocket, condom,' he breathes.

I slowly dig into his pocket, looking at his face as I feel him around me. His mouth is open. I fish the two packages of foil that I find and lay them on the bed near her hips. Of them! My impatient fingers reach the button of his belt and undo it, groping a little. I am beyond excited.

'So impatient, Miss Black,' he whispered, his voice humorous. I pull the zipper, and now I'm faced with the problem of taking off his pants... hmm. I drag myself and pull. They barely move. I frown. How can it be so difficult?

'I can't stand still if you're going to bite that lip,' he warns, then arches his pelvis off the bed so I can pull up his pants and boxers at the same time, whoa... the release. He throws his clothes to the ground.

Saint Moses, he's all mine to play with, and suddenly it's Christmas.

'Now what are you going to do?' he breathes, all traces of humor gone. I reach out and touch him, looking at his expression

as I do. His mouth is shaped like a letter O as he takes a deep breath. Her skin is so smooth and soft... and hard... hmm, what a delicious combination. I lean forward, my hair falls around me and it's in my mouth. I suck, hard. He closes his eyes, his hips shaking under me.

'Damn it, Naddalin, shut up,' he moaned.

I feel so powerful, it's such an exhilarating feeling, teasing him and testing him with my mouth and tongue. He tenses under me as I run my mouth up and down, pushing him down my throat, my lips tight... over and over.

'Stop, Naddalin, stop. I don't want to come.'

I sit up, blinking at him, and panting like him, but confused. I thought I was in charge. My inner goddess looks like someone who snatched her ice cream from her.

'Your innocence and your enthusiasm are very disarming,' he gasped. 'You, besides... that's what we have to do.'

Oh.

'Here, put this on.' He hands me an aluminum bag.

Holy Crap. How I tear up the package and the rubber condom is sticky in my fingers.

'Pinch the top then roll it up. You don't want any air at the end of that sucker,'

He gasps.

...And very slowly, concentrating hard, I do as I'm told.

'Damn, you're killing me here, Naddalin,' he moaned.

I admire my work and him. He is a beautiful specimen of a man, looking at him is very, very exciting.

'Now. I want to be buried in you,' he whispers. I look at him, intimidated, and he suddenly sits up, so we're face to face.

'Like that,' he breathes, and he winds one hand around my hips, lifting me slightly, and with the other, he positions himself under me, and very slowly, relieves me towards him.

I moaned as he opened me, filling me, his mouth open in surprise at the feeling soft, sublime, scary, and too full. Oh please.

'That's right, baby, feel me, all of me,' he growls and briefly closes his eyes.

-And-

He's inside of me, sheathed to the hilt, and he holds me in place, for seconds... minutes... I have no idea, staring intently in my eyes.

'It's deep like that,' he whispers. He flexes and swings his hips in the same motion, and I moan... oh my - the sensation radiates in my stomach... all over. Shit!

'Again,' I whisper. He smiles a lazy smile and obliges.

Moaning, I throw my head back, my hair falls down my back, and very slowly it falls back on the bed.

'You move, Naddalin, up and down, however you like. Take my hands,' he breathes, his voice hoarse and low and so sexy.

I shake his hands for life. Slowly I push it and come back down, oh my God. Her eyes burn with mad expectation. His breathing is irregular, matching mine, and he lifts his pelvis as I descend, bouncing me. We take the beat... up, down, up, down... over and over again... and it's so... good. Between my gasping breaths, the deep and overflowing fullness... the vehement feeling that pulsates in me that builds quickly, I look at him, my eyes riveted... and I see the wonder there, marveling at me.

I fuck him. I am in charge. He is mine and I am his. The thought pushes me, weighted with concrete, overboard, and I cum around him... screaming incoherently.

He grabs my hips, and closes his eyes, tilts his head back, jaw straight, he comes quietly. I collapse onto his chest, overwhelmed, somewhere between fantasy and reality, a place where there are no hard or soft boundaries.

Slowly the outside world invades my senses, and oh my God, what an invasion. I float, my limbs were soft and languid, completely exhausted. I'm lying on top of him, my head on his chest, and he smells divine: fresh, washed laundry and

expensive body wash, and the best, most seductive scent on the planet... Grayson. I don't want to move, I want to breathe this elixir for eternity. I snuggled up to him, wishing I didn't have the barrier of his t-shirt. And as rhyme and sanity return to the rest of my body, I extend my hand across her chest. This is the first time I touch it here. He's firm... strong. His hand rises and grabs mine, but he softens the blow by pulling it towards his mouth and gently kissing my knuckles.

He turns around so he looks at me.

'No,' he whispers, then kisses me lightly.

'Why don't you like to be touched?' I whisper, looking into soft gray eyes.

'Because, I have numerous Shadows of shit, Naddalin.'

Oh... his honesty is completely disarming. I blinked at him.

'I had a very difficult introduction to life. I don't want to burden you with details.

Don't. 'He strokes his nose against mine, then pulls away from me and sits up.

'I think those are all bases covered. How was that?'

He looks completely satisfied with himself and seems very down to earth at the same time like he's just ticked another box on a checklist. I am still in shock at the difficult introduction to the Life Commentary. It's so frustrating - I desperately need to know more. But he won't tell me. I tilt my head to the side, like him, and make a huge effort to smile at him.

'If you imagine for a minute that I think you've handed over control to me, well you didn't take my GPA into account.' I smile shyly at him. 'But thank you for the illusion.'

'Miss Black, you're not just a pretty face. You've had six orgasms so far and they're all mine,' he brags, cheerfully again.

I blushed and blinked at the same time, as he looked at me. He counts! His brow furrows.

'Do you have something to tell me? his voice is suddenly harsh.

I frown. Shit.

'I had a dream this morning.'

'Oh?' He looks at me.

Double shit. Am I in trouble?

'I came in my sleep.' I throw my arm over my eyes. He does not say anything. I look at him under my arm and he looks amused.

'In your sleep?'

'Woke me up.'

'I'm sure. What were you dreaming about?'

Shit.

'You.'

'What was I doing?'

I throw my arm over my eyes again. And like a little child, I briefly entertain the idea that if I can't see him, then he can't see me.

'Naddalin, what was I doing, I won't ask you again.'

'You had a riding crop.'

He moves my arm.

'Really?'

'Yes.' I am crimson.

'There is still hope for you,' he whispers. 'I have several whips.'

'Brown braided leather?'

He's laughing.

'No, but I'm sure I could have one.' Her gray eyes shine with excitement.

Leaning in, he kisses me briefly then gets up and grabs his boxers, oh no... he leaves. I take a glance at the time - it's only nine-forty. I also get out of bed and grab my sweatpants and a tank top, then sit on the bed, my legs crossed, staring at him. I don't want him to leave. What can I do?

'When is your period due?' He interrupts my thoughts.

What!

'I hate wearing these clothes,' he growls. He lifts the condom, then puts it on the floor, and puts on his jeans.

'Good?' he invites me in when I don't answer, and he looks at me expectantly as if he's waiting for my opinion

on the weather. Holy shit... These are personal things.

'Next week.' I look at my hands.

'You have to settle for a little contraception.'

He's so bossy. I look at him blankly. He sits on the bed, putting on his shoes and socks.

'Do you have a doctor?

I shake my head. We're back to mergers and acquisitions - another 180-degree change in mood.

He frowns.

'I can ask mine to come to see you at your apartment - Sunday morning before you come to see me. Or he can see you at my house. Which do you prefer?

No pressure then. Something else he's paying for... but it's for his benefit.

'Your place.' This means that I am guaranteed to see him on Sunday.

'Okay. I'll let you know the time.'

'You go?'

Don't go... stay with me, please.

'Yes.'

Why?

'How are you going to come back?' I whisper.

'Stephen will come get me.'

'I can drive you. I have a nice new car.'

He looks at me, his expression warm.

'It's more like that. But I think you drank too much.'

'Did you make me drunk on purpose?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because you think too much about everything, and you're reluctant like your stepfather. A drop of wine in you and you start talking, and I need you to communicate honestly with me. Otherwise you slap, and I have no idea what you are thinking. In vino veritas, Naddalin. '

'And do you think you're always honest with me?'

'I strive to be.' He looks at me suspiciously. 'It will only work if we are honest with each other.'

'I would like you to stay and use this.' I lift the second condom.

He smiles and his eyes sparkle with humor.

'Naddalin, I've crossed so many lines here tonight. I have to go. I'll see you on Sunday. I'll have the revised contract ready for you, and then we can really start playing.'

'To play?' Holy shit. My heart leaps in my mouth.

'I would like to do a scene with you. But I won't do it until you sign, so I know you're ready.

'Oh. So I could stretch this out, if I don't sign?'

He looks at me evaluating, then his lips twist into a smile.

'Well, I guess you could, but I can crack under the tension.'

'CrackHow?' My inner goddess has awakened and is paying attention.

He slowly nods, then smiles, teasingly.

'It could get really ugly.

Her smile is contagious.

'Ugly, how?'

'Oh you know, explosions, car chases, kidnapping, incarceration.'

'Would you kidnap me?'

'Oh yeah,' he smirked.

'Hold me against my will?' Jeez, it's hot.

'Oh yeah,' he nods. 'And then we are talking TPE 24/7.'

'You lost me,' I breathe, my heart beats... is it serious?

'Total Power Exchange - 24 hours a day.' Her eyes are shining and I can feel her excitement from where I'm sitting.

Holy shit.

'So, you have no choice,' he said Naddalindonically.

'Clearly.' I can't help the Naddalincasm in my voice as my eyes turn to the sky.

'Oh, Naddalin Black, did you just roll your eyes at me?'

Shit!

'No,' I squeak.

'I think you did. What did I say I would do to you if you roll your eyes at me again?'

Shit... He sits on the edge of the bed.

'Come here,' he said softly.

I bleach. Damn... he's serious. I sit down to watch him completely still.

'I didn't sign,' I whisper.

'I told you what I would do. I am a man of my word. I'm going to spank you, then I'm going to fuck you real fast and hard. Looks like we'll need that condom after all. '

Her voice is so soft, menacing and she's damn hot. My insides practically twist with a powerful, needy, liquid desire. He looks at me, waiting, his eyes blazing. Temporarily, I unfold my legs. Should I run? That's it, our relationship is at stake, right here, right now. Do I let him or do I say no, and so that's it? Because I know it will be over if I say no. Do it! My inner goddess is begging me, my subconscious is as paralyzed as me. 'I am waiting,' he said. 'I am not a patient man.'

Oh for the love of all that is holy. I am panting, scared, excited. Blood hammers my body, my legs are like jelly. Slowly, I crawl towards him until I'm next to him.

'Good girl,' he whispers. 'Now get up.'

Oh shit... can't he just be done with I don't know if I can handle it. Hesitantly, I climb to my feet. He reaches out and I place the condom in his palm. Suddenly he grabs me, causing me to fall onto his knees. With a fluid movement, he tilts his body so that my chest rests on the bed next to him. He throws his right leg over mine and places his left forearm on my lower back, holding me so I can't move. Oh fuck. 'Put your

hands on either side of your head,' he orders.

I obey immediately.

'Why am I doing this, Naddalin?' He asks.

'Because, I rolled my eyes at you,' I can barely speak.

'Do you think it's polite?'

'No.'

'Do you want to do it again?'

'No.'

'I'll spank you every time you do, you understand?'

Very slowly, he pulls my jogging pants down. Oh, how humiliating, demeaning, scary and hot. He makes such a meal out of it. My heart is in my mouth. I can hardly breathe. Damn, is that gonna hurt?

He puts his hand on my bare bottom, caresses me gently, caresses in circles with his flat palm. And then his hand is no longer there... and he hits me - hard. Oh! My eyes open in response to the pain

and I try to stand up, but his hand moves between my shoulder blades and holds me back. He strokes me again where he hit me, and his breathing has changed - it's louder, harder. It hits me again and again, quickly away.

Damn it hurts. I made no sound, my face tightened in pain. I try to get away from the hits - stimulated by adrenaline rushes that run through my body.

'Keep still,' he growls. 'Or I'll spank you longer.'

He rubs me now, and the blow follows. A rhythmic pattern emerges, caresses, caresses, hits hard. I have to focus to deal with this pain. My mind goes blank as I try to absorb the grueling sensation. He doesn't hit me twice in a row in the same place - it spreads pain.

'Aargh! I scream at the tenth slap - and I don't know I mentally counted the hits.

'I'm just warming up.'

He hits me again and then he strokes me gently. The combination of the hard blow and his gentle caress is so

insane. He hits me again... it gets harder and harder to take.

My face hurts, it's so fucked up. He caresses me gently then the blow comes. I scream again.

'Nobody can hear you, baby, just me.'

-And-

It hits me over and over again. From somewhere deep inside me, I want to beg him to stop. But I don't. I don't want to give him satisfaction. He continues the relentless pace. I scream six more times. Eighteen slaps in total. My body sings, sings with its ruthless onslaught.

'Enough,' he breathes huskily. 'Nice work, Naddalin. Now I'm going to fuck you.'

He gently strokes my butt, and it burns me as it strokes me round and round and down. Suddenly he inserts two fingers inside me, taking me completely by surprise. I gasp, this new assault breaking the numbness around my brain.

'Feel that. Look how much your body likes it, Naddalin. You're soaked just for me.'

There is fear in his voice. He moves his fingers, in and out in quick succession.

I moaned, no surely not, and then his fingers went... and I left craving.

'Next time, I'll make you count. Now where's that condom?'

He reaches next to him for the condom and gently lifts me, pushing my face down on the bed. I hear the sound of her zipper and the tearing of the foil. He drags my sweatpants and guides me into a kneeling position, gently stroking my now very sore butt.

'I'll take you now. You can come,' he whispers.

WhatLike I have a choice.

-And-

He's inside me, filling me up quickly, I moan loudly. He moves, hammers me, a fast and intense pace against my aching behind. The feeling is beyond the exquisite, raw and demeaning, and

breathtaking. My senses are ravaged, disconnected, focusing only on what he's doing to me. What he makes me feel, that familiar pull deep in my stomach, tightening, speeding up. NO... and my treacherous body explodes in an intense and overwhelming orgasm.

'Oh, Naddalin! he screams as he finds his release, holding me in place as he pours himself into me. He collapses, panting hard next to me, and he pulls me on him and buries his face in my hair, holding me close to me.

'Oh, baby,' he breathes. 'Welcome to my world.'

We lie there, panting together, waiting for our breathing to slow down. He gently strokes my hair. I'm on his chest again. But this time, I don't have the strength to raise my hand and feel it. Boy... I survived. It wasn't that bad. I am more stoic than I thought. My inner goddess is the prostate... well at least she's calm. Grayson rubs my hair again, inhaling deeply.

'Good job, baby,' he whispered, quiet joy in his voice. His words wrap

around me like a soft, fluffy Heathman hotel towel, and I'm so glad he's happy.

He takes the strap of my tank top.

'Is this what you sleep in?' He asks softly.

'Yes,' I breathe sleepily.

'You should be in silk and satins, beautiful girl. I'll take you shopping.'

'I like my sweats,' I whisper, trying and not looking irritated.

He still kisses my head.

'We'll see,' he said.

We lie for a few more minutes, hours, who knows, and I think I'm dozing off.

'I have to go,' he says, and leaning in, he kisses my forehead softly. 'Are you OK?' Her voice is soft.

I think about his question. My back is sore. Well, now, and surprisingly I feel, other than exhausted, beaming. The achievement is humiliating, unexpected. I do not understand. Holy shit.

'I'm fine,' I whisper. I don't want to say more.

He wakes up.

'Where's your bathroom?'

'Along the hallway to the left.'

He takes the other condom and leaves the room. I stand up stiffly and put my jogging pants back on. They rub a little against my still prickly butt. I am so confused by my reaction. I remember him saying - I can't remember when - that I would feel so much better after a good hiding place. How is that possible so that I don't understand. But strangely, I do. I can't say I enjoyed the experience I would still go a long way to avoid it, but now... I have this feeling of security, weird, drenched in the afterglow, full. I put my head in my hands. I just don't understand.

Grayson enters the room again. I can't look him in the eye. I look at my hands.

'I found some baby oil. Let me rub your bottom.'

What?

'No, I'm fine.'

'Naddalin,' he warns, and I want to roll my eyes but stop quickly. I stand facing the bed. Sitting next to me, he gently pulls my sweatpants down. Go up and down like the drawers of whores my bitterly subconscious remarks. In my head, I tell him where to go.

Grayson throws baby oil in his hand then rubs my butt with careful tenderness - makeup remover to soothing balm for a spanked ass, who would have thought it was such a versatile liquid.

'I like my hands on you,' he whispers, and I have to agree, too.

'There,' he says when he's finished and pulls my pants up.

I glance at my clock. It is ten-thirty.

'I'm leaving NOW.'

'I'll see you outside.' I still can't watch it.

Taking my hand, he leads me to the front door. Fortunately, Maury is still not home. She still has dinner with her parents

and Paul. I'm really glad she wasn't here to hear my punishment.

'Don't you need to call Stephen?' I ask, avoiding eye contact.

'Stephen has been here since nine o'clock. Look at me,' he hisses.

I find it hard to meet his eyes, but when I do, he looks at me in wonder.

'You haven't cried,' he whispers, then suddenly grabs me and kisses me fervently. 'Sunday,' he whispers against my lips, and it's both a promise and a threat.

I watch him walk down the path and get into the big black Audi. He doesn't look back. I close the door and stand helpless in the living room of an apartment where I will only spend two more nights. A place where I have lived happily for almost four years... yet today, for the first time, I feel alone and uncomfortable here, unhappy with my own business. Have I strayed so far from who I am, I know that hiding, not far beneath my rather numb exterior, is a pit of tears. What do I do? The iroPittsburgh is so bad that I can't even sit back and enjoy a good cry. I'll have to get up. I know it's late, but I decide to call my mom.

'Honey, how are you, how did your graduation go?' she gets excited over the phone. Her voice is a soothing balm.

'Sorry, it's so late,' I whisper.

She pauses.

'Naddalin, what's wrong?' She's all serious now.

'Nothing, mom, I just wanted to hear your voice.'

She is silent for a while.

'Naddalin, what is it, please tell me.' Her voice is soft and comforting, and I know she cares. Without being invited, my tears begin to flow. I have cried so often these past few days.

'Please, Naddalin,' she said, and her anguish mirrored mine.

'Oh, mom, it's a man.'

'What did he do to you?' His alarm is palpable.

'It's not like that.' Although it's... Oh shit. I don't want to worry him. I just want someone else to be strong for me right now.

'Naddalin, please you're worrying me.'

I take a deep breath.

'I fell in love with this guy, and he's so different from me, and I don't know if we should be together.'

'Oh, honey. I wish I could be with you. I'm so sorry I missed your degree.’

You fell in love with someone, finally. Oh, honey, men, they're so delicate. They're a different species, honey. How long have you known him? '

Grayson is a different species... different planets.

'Oh, almost three weeks or more.’

'Naddalin, honey, it's not the time at all. How can you know someone in this kind of weather? Take things easy with him and hold him off until you decide to go. He is worthy of you. '

Wow... it's annoying when my mom is so insightful, but she's too late for that.

Is he worthy of me? It's an interesting concept. I always wonder if I am worthy of him.

'Honey, you look so miserable. Come home - come visit us. I miss you, honey. Bob would love to see you too. You can take a step back and maybe take a step back. I need a break. You've worked so hard. '

Oh boy, is that tempting? Flee to Georgia. Take some sun, cocktails

My mother's good humor... her loving arms.

'I have two job interviews in New York on Monday.'

'Oh, that's wonderful news.'

The door opens and Maury appears, smiling at me. Her face falls when she sees that I cry.

'Mom, I have to go. I'm going to think about a visit. Thank you.'

'Honey, please don't let a man get under your skin. You're way too young.

'Yes, mom, I love you.'

'Oh, Naddalin, I love you too, so much. Stay safe, honey.' I hang up and face Maury who is looking at me.

'Has that obscenely rich asshole upset you yet?'

'No... sort of... uh... yes.'

'Just tell him to take a hike, Naddalin.' You've had some ups and downs since you met him.

I've never seen you like this.

The world of Mary Smith is very clear, very black and white. Not the intangible, mysterious hues and waves of gray that color my world. Welcome to my world.

'Sit down, let's talk. Let's have some wine. Oh, you had champagne.' She sees the bottle. 'Good things too.'

I smile inefficiently, staring at the couch apprehensively. I approach it with caution.

Hmm... sit down.

'Are you OK?'

'I fell and landed on my butt.'

She doesn't think to question my explanation because I'm one of the least coordinated people in Washington state. I never thought I would see it as a blessing. I sit down cautiously, pleasantly surprised that I'm fine, and turn my attention to Maury, but my mind flares up and I'm drawn back to the Heathman - 'Well, if you were mine you couldn't 'sit down for a week after the bang you did yesterday. 'He said so then, and all that

I could focus on being him. All the warning signs were there, I was too ignorant and too in love to notice. Maury returns to the living room with a bottle of red wine and washed teacups. 'Here we are.' She hands me a cup of wine. It won't be as good as the Bolly. 'Naddalin, if he's an idiot with engagement issues, get him out of the way. Although I don't really understand his engagement issues. He couldn't take his eyes off you under the marquee, he was looking at you like a hawk. I would say it was. completely enamored, but maybe he has a funny way of showing it. 'Smitten Grayson 'funny way to show it, I'll say.' Maury, it's complicated. How was your evening? I ask. I can't talk to

Maury about it without revealing too much, but one question today

'There and Maury are gone. It's so reassuring to sit down and listen to his normal chatter. The good news is that Paul might come live with us after their vacation. It will be fun - Paul is a hoot.' I frown. I don't think Grayson will approve. Well... hard. He's just going to have to suck it off. I have a few cups of wine tea and decide to call it a night. It's been a very long day. Maury hugs me, then grabs the phone to call Jack. I check the average machine after brushing my teeth. There's an email from Grayson. From: Grayson Murray Subject: You Date May 26, 2009, 23:14 To Naddalin Black Deer, Miss Black You are simply exquisite. The most beautiful, intelligent, witty, and courageous woman that I have ever met. Take some Advil - it's not a request. And don't drive your Beetle anymore. I will know. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Oh, don't drive my car anymore! I type my answer. From: Naddalin Black Subject: Flattery Date: May 26, 2009, 11:20 PM To Grayson Murray Dear, Mr. Maury Flattery will get you nowhere, but since you've been everywhere, the point is moot. I'll have to drive my Beetle to a garage so I can sell it -

so I won't graciously accept any of your nonsense about it. Red wine is always more preferable to Advil. Naddalin PS Caning is a HARD limit for me.

I hit send. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Frustrated Women Who Can't Accept Compliments Date: May 26, 2009, 11:26 PM To Naddalin Black Deer, Mrs. Black, I don't flatter you. You should go to bed. I accept your addition within strict limits. Do not drink too much. Stephen will get rid of your car and also get a good price for it. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: Stephen - Is he the right fit for the job? Date: May 26, 2009, 11:40 PM To Grayson Maury Dear, Sir I'm intrigued that you're happy to risk letting your right arm drive my car - but not a woman you fuck now and then. How can I be sure that Stephen is the man to find me the best deal for a said car? I have, in the past, probably before meeting you, known to get a good deal.

Naddalin From: Grayson Murray

Subject: Attention! Date: May 26, 2009, 11:44 PM To Naddalin Black Deer, Mrs. Black I guess it's RED WINE talking, and you've had a long day. Although I am

tempted to drive back there to make sure you don't sit for a week rather than an evening. Stephen is an ex-army and is capable of riding anything from a motorcycle to a Sherman Tank. Your car is safe for him. Now please don't think of yourself as a woman that I fuck now and then because, frankly, it drives me crazy, and you really wouldn't like me when I'm angry. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black Subject: Pay Attention Date: May 26, 2009, 11:57 PM To Grayson Murray Dear, Mr. Maury I'm not sure I like you anyway, especially at the moment. Mrs. Black From Grayson Murray Subject: Pay attention to yourself Date: May 27, 2009, 12:03 AM To Naddalin Black Why don't you love me? Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: Watch Out For Yourself Date: May 27, 2009, 12:09 AM To Grayson Maury Because you never stay with me. There, that gave him to think.

I stop the machine with a momentum that I don't feel and crawl into my bed. I turn off my nightlight and look at the ceiling. It's been a long day, one emotional key after another. It was

heartwarming spending time with Ray. He looked good, and strangely he approved of Grayson. Jeez, Maury and his gargantuan mouth. Hear Grayson talk about hunger. What is all this about God and the car? I didn't even tell Maury about the new car. What was Grayson thinking? And then tonight he hit me. I have never been touched in my life.

What I got myself into very slowly, my tears, stopped by the arrival of Maury, started to slip down the side of my face and into my ears. I fell in love with someone who is so emotionally closed, I won't be hurt - deep down as I know - someone who by their admission is completely screwed up. Why is he so fucked up? It must be horrible to be as affected as he is, and the thought that as a child he suffered unbearable cruelty makes me cry harder. Maybe if he was more normal he wouldn't want you, my subconscious slyly contributes to my thoughts... and deep in my heart I know it's true.

I transform into a pillow and the floodgates open... and for the first time in years, I sob uncontrollably into my pillow. I am momentarily distracted from my dark soul night by Maury's cries. 'What do you

think you're doing here?' 'Well you can't!' 'What the fuck have you done to her now?' 'Ever since she met you, she cries all the time.' 'You can't come in here!' Grayson bursts into my room and unceremoniously turns on the overhead light, making me squint. 'Jesus, Naddalinh,' he mumbles. He turns off the switch again and is by my side in a moment. 'What are you doing here?' I gasp between sobs. Shit. I can't stop crying. He turns on the nightlight, making me squint again. Maury comes and stands in the doorway. 'Do you want me to throw that asshole out?' she asks, beaming with thermo-nuclear hostility. Grayson raises his eyebrows at her, no doubt surprised by her flattering epithet and savage antagonism. I shake my head and she rolls her eyes at me. Oh… I wouldn't do that near Mr. G. 'Just scream if you need me,' she said more quietly.

'Maury - your cards are marked,' she hissed at him. He nods to her, and she turns and pulls the door but doesn't close it. Grayson looks at me, his expression was serious, his face ashen. He wears his pinstriped jacket and from his inside pocket, he takes out a handkerchief and hands it to me. I think I still have his other somewhere. 'What is happening?' he asks

softly. 'Why are you here?' I ask, ignoring his question. My tears miraculously stopped, but I end up with dry breakouts that hollow out my body. 'Part of my role is to take care of your needs. You said you wanted me to stay, so here I am. And yet I find you like this.' He blinks at me, really taken aback. 'I'm sure I'm responsible, but I don't know why. Is it because I hit you?' I stand up, wincing from my aching butt. I sit down and face him. 'Did you take Advil?' I shake my head. He narrows his eyes, gets up, and leaves the room. I hear him talking to Maury but not what they say. He was back moments later with some pills and a cup of water. 'Take this,' he orders softly, sitting on my bed next to me. I do what I'm told.

'Talk to me,' he whispers. 'You told me you were fine. I would never have left you if I thought you were like this. I look at my hands. What can I say that I haven't already said I want more. I want him to stay because he wants to stay with me, not because I'm in a mess, and I don't want him to beat me, is that so unreasonable? 'I guess when you said you were okay you weren't. I rinse. 'I thought I was fine.' 'Naddalin, you can't tell me what you think I want to hear. It's not very honest,' he

berates me. 'How can I trust everything you have told me?' I look at him, and he frowns, a dark look in his eyes. He runs both hands through his hair.

'How did you feel while I was hitting you and after?' 'I didn't like it. I'd rather you didn't do it again.' 'You weren't supposed to like this.' 'Why do you love him?' I am watching him. My question surprises him. 'Do you want to know?' 'Oh, believe me, I am fascinated.' And I can't quite keep the Naddalincasm out of my voice. He narrows his eyes again. 'Careful,' he warns. I bleach. 'Are you going to hit me again?' I challenge myself. 'Not tonight.' Phew... my subconscious and I both have a silent sigh of relief. 'So,' I invite him. 'I like the control it gives me, Naddalin. I want you to behave especially, and if you don't, I will punish you, and you will learn to behave the way I want. I like to punish you.

I've wanted to spank you ever since you asked me if I was gay. 'I'm flushing the memory. Damn, I wanted to spank myself after that question. So Mary Smith is responsible for all of this, and if she had gone to this interview and asked her gay question, she would be sitting here with her ass sore.. I don't like that thought. How

confusing is that? 'So you don't like who I am.' He looks at me, puzzled again. 'I think you are beautiful the way you are.' 'So why are you trying to change me?' 'I don't want to change you. I would like you to be courteous and follow all of the rules I gave you and don't challenge me. Simple,' said 'But you want to punish me?' 'Yes.' 'That's what I don't understand.' He sighs and runs his hands through his hair again. 'That's how I'm made, Naddalin. I need to control you. I need you to behave a certain way, and if you don't - I love watching your beautiful alabaster skin turn pink and warm under my hands. It excites me. ' Holy shit. Now we are getting somewhere. 'So it's not the pain you're giving me?' He swallows. 'A little, to see if you can take it, but that's not the whole reason. It's the fact that you're mine to do whatever I want - ultimate control over someone else. And that turns me on. Big time, Naddalin. Look, I can't explain myself very well… I've never had to do this before.

I haven't thought deeply about it. I've always been with it. like-minded people. 'He shrugs in apology.' And you still haven't answered my question - how did you feel afterward? ' Confused. ' You got sexually turned on by it. That, Naddalin, 'he

briefly closes his eyes, and when he opens them again and looks at me, they burn smoky embers. His expression pulls on that dark part of me, buried deep in my stomach - my libido, awakened and tamed. by him, but still now, insatiable. 'Don't look at me like that,' he whispers. I frown. Jeez, what have I done now? 'I have no preserved motions, Naddalin, and you know, you're upset. Contrary to what your roommate thinks, I'm not a priapic freak. So, did you feel confused? I squirm under his intense gaze. 'You have no problem being honest with me in print. Your emails always tell me exactly how you feel. Why can't you do that in conversation, am I intimidating you so much?' I chose an imaginary spot on my mom's blue and cream quilt. 'You surprise me, Grayson. It completely overwhelms me. I feel like Icarus flying too close to the Sun, 'I whisper. He gasps. 'Well, I think you got that the wrong way,' he whispers. 'What?' 'Oh, Naddalin, you have bewitched me. Isn't that obvious?' No, not to me. Bewitched... my inner goddess looks open-mouthed.

Even she doesn't believe it. 'You still haven't answered my question. Write me an email, please. But for now, I would really like to sleep. Can I stay?' 'You want to stay?' I can't hide the hope in my voice.

'You wanted me here.' 'You didn't answer my question.' 'I'll write you an email,' he mumbles excitedly. Standing, he empties his pockets of BlackBerry jeans, keys, wallet, and cash. Holy cow, men have a lot of shit in their pockets. He takes off his watch, shoes, socks, and jeans and places his jacket on my chair. He goes to the other side of the bed and slips. 'Lie down,' he orders. I slowly slip under the covers, wincing slightly, looking at him.

Damn... he's staying. I think I am numb with elated shock. He leans on one elbow and looks at me. 'If you're going to cry. Cry in front of me. I need to know.' 'Do you want me to cry?' 'Not particularly. I just want to know how you feel. I don't want you to slip through my fingers. Turn off the light. It's late, and we both have to work tomorrow.' So here... and always. also bossy, but I can't complain he's in my bed. I don't quite understand why... maybe I should cry more often in front of me. I turn off the bedside lamp. 'Lie on your side, facing me,' he whispers in the darkness. I roll my eyes knowing he can't see me, but I do as I'm told. Carefully he moves and puts his arms around me and pulls me to his chest... oh my God. 'Sleep, baby,' he whispers, and I can feel his nose in my hair

as he inhales deeply. Holy cow. Grayson Maury sleeps with me, and in the comfort and solace of his arms, I wake up to a peaceful sleep.

The candle flame is too hot. It sparkles and dances in the too hot breeze, a breeze that brings no respite from the heat. Soft gossamer wings float in the darkness, sprinkling dusty scales in the circle of light. I find it hard to resist, but I am attracted. And then it's so bright, and I'm flying too close to the sun, dazzled by the light, fried and melting from the heat, weary of my efforts to stay aloft. I am so warm. The heat... it's stifling, overwhelming. It wakes me up.

I open my eyes and am draped in Grayson Murray. It's wrapped around me like a victory flag. He sleeps soundly with his head on my chest, his arm on me, holding me against me, one of his legs thrown back and hanging around mine. He suffocates me with his body heat and he is heavy. I take a moment to realize that he's still in my bed and sleeping soundly, and it's bright outside - in the morning. He spent the whole night with me.

My right arm is outstretched, presumably looking for a cool spot, and as I

assess the fact that he's still with me, the idea occurs to me that I can touch him. He is asleep. Tentatively, I raise my hand and run my fingers behind her back. Deep in his throat, I hear a soft moan of distress, and he stirs. He stroked my chest, inhaling deeply as he woke up. Sleeping, blinking gray eyes meet mine under her tousled mop.

'Hello,' he mumbles and frowns. 'Jesus, even in my sleep I am drawn to you.' He moves slowly, loosening his limbs from me as he comes to his senses. I become

aware of his erection against my hip. He notices my reaction with wide eyes, and he smiles a slow, sexy smile.

'Hmm... that has possibilities, but I think we should wait until Sunday.' He leans in and strokes my ear with his nose.

I blush, but then I feel seven shades of scarlet of her warmth.

'You are very hot,' I whisper.

'You're not that bad yourself,' he whispers and presses himself against me, suggestively.

I hunt a little more. That's not what I meant. He leans on his elbow and looks at me, amused. He leans in and, to my surprise, plants a soft kiss on my lips.

'Sleep well?' he asks.

I nod, staring at him, and realize that I slept well except maybe for the last half hour when I was too hot.

'Me too.' He frowns. 'Yeah, really good.' He raises his eyebrows in confused surprise.

'What time is it?'

I glance at my alarm.

'It's 7:30 am.'

'7:30 am... shit.' He gets out of bed and hangs out on his jeans.

It's my turn to look amused as I sit down. Grayson Maury is late and pissed off. This is something I had never seen before. I realize belatedly that my behind is no longer sore.

'You have such a bad influence on me. I have a meeting. I have to go - I have to be in Pittsburgh by eight o'clock. Are you smiling at me?

'Yes.'

He smiles.

'I'm late. I'm not late. Another first, Miss Black.' He pulls on his jacket, then leans over and grabs my head, his hands on either side.

'Sunday,' he says, and the word is loaded with an unspoken promise. Deep in my body unfolds then tightens in delicious anticipation, the feeling is exquisite. Damn, if my mind could just follow my body. He leans in and kisses me quickly. He grabs his things from my side table and his shoes - which he doesn't put on.

'Stephen will come and sort your Beetle. I was serious. Don't drive. I'll see you at my house on Sunday. I'll email you.' And like a whirlwind, it's gone.

Oh my God, Grayson Maury spent the night with me, and I feel rested. And there was no sex, only hugs. He told me he had never slept with anyone - but he slept with me three times.

I smile and slowly get out of bed. I feel more optimistic than I have in a day or two. I head for the kitchen, needing a cup of tea.

After breakfast, I shower and get dressed quickly for my last day at Eastwood's. It's the end of an era - goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Eastwood, OVHS, York, the apartment, my Beetle. I take a look at the nasty machine - it's only 7:52 am. I've got time.

From: Naddalin Black

Topic: Assault and drums: The aftermath Date: May 27, 2009, 8:05 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

You wanted to know why I felt confused after you - what euphemism should we apply - spanked, punished, beaten, assaulted me. Well, during the whole alarming process I felt humiliated, degraded, and abused. And to my mortification, you're right, I was excited, and it was unexpected. As you well know, everything sexual is new to me - I just wish I was more experienced and therefore more prepared. I was shocked to feel excited.

What worried me was how I felt afterward. And it's more difficult to articulate.

I was happy that you were happy. I felt relieved that it wasn't as painful as I thought. And when I was lying in your arms, I felt - full. But I feel very uncomfortable, even guilty, feeling that way. It doesn't suit me and I'm confused as a result. Does that answer your question?

I hope the world of mergers and acquisitions is more exciting than ever... and that you are not too late.

Thanks for staying with me.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Free Your Mind

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:24 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Interesting... if a little over the top Miss Black header.

To answer your questions:

I'm going to go with the spanking - because that's what it was.

So you felt demeaned, degraded, mistreated, and assaulted - how much Tess

Durbeyfield of you. I believe it was you who decided on the debasement if I remember correctly. Do you feel like this or do you think you should feel like this?

Two very different things. If that's how you feel, do you think you could just try to embrace those feelings, deal with them, to me that's what a submissive would do?

I appreciate your inexperience. I appreciate it and am only beginning to understand what it means. Simply put... it means you are mine in every way.

Yes, you were excited which in turn was very exciting, there is nothing wrong with that.

Happy didn't even begin to cover up what I was feeling. Ecstatic joy draws near.

Punishing spanking hurts a lot more than sensual spanking - so it's about as hard as it can be unless of course, you're committing a major transgression, in which case I'll use a tool to punish you. My hand was very sore. But I love this.

I also felt full - more than you could ever imagine.

Don't waste your energy on guilt, feelings of wrongdoing, etc. We are consenting adults and what we do behind closed doors is between us. You have to free your mind and listen to your body.

The world of mergers and acquisitions is not as exciting as you are Miss Black.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Holy shit... mine in every way. My breathing is blocked.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: consenting adults!

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:26 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

Are you not in a meeting?

I'm very glad you have a pain in your hand.

-And-

If I listened to my body, I would now be in Alaska.

Naddalin

PS I will think about embracing these feelings.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: You didn't call the cops

Date: May 27, 2009 8:35 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Miss Black

I'm in a meeting to discuss the futures market if you're interested.

For the record - you stood next to me knowing what I was going to do.

You never asked me to stop - you didn't use either of the two safety words.

You are an adult - you have choices.

Frankly, I can't wait for the next time my palm tingles with pain.

You are not listening to the right part of your body.

Alaska is very cold and there is no place to run. I will find you.

I can track your cell phone - remember?

Go to work.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I frown on the screen. He is of course right. It's my choice. Hmm. Is he serious about coming to find me, if I decide to escape for a while? My mind briefly turns to my mother's offer. I hit on the answer.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Stalker

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:36 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

Have you sought therapy for your stalker tendencies?

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Stalker?

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:38 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

I pay the eminent Dr. LORENZO a small fortune concerning my stalker and other tendencies.

Go to work.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Maury Enterprises Holdings Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Item: Expensive Charlatans

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:40 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

May I humbly suggest that you seek a second opinion?

I'm not sure Dr. LORENZO is very effective.

Miss Black

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Second Opinion

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:43 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

It's not whether it's your business, humble or not, but Dr. LORENZO is my second opinion.

You'll have to speed up, in your new car, putting yourself at unnecessary risk - I think that's against the rules.

GO TO WORK.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: SHOUTY CAPITALS

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:47 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

As the object of your stalker tendencies - I think that's my business.

I haven't signed yet. So rules schedules. And I don't start until 9:30 a.m.

Miss Black

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Descriptive linguistics

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:49 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Schedules I don't know where it appears in the Webster Grayson Murray dictionary

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Descriptive linguistics

Date: May 27, 2009 8:52 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

It's between the control freak and the stalker.

And descriptive linguistics is a difficult limit for me.

Will you stop bothering me now?

I would like to go to work in my new car.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Stimulating but fun young women

Date: May 27, 2009 8:56 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

My palm contracts.

Drive carefully, Miss Black.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

The Audi is a pleasure to drive. It has power steering. Wanda, my Beetle, has no power in her - Pittsburgh where, so my daily training, which was driving my Beetle, will cease. Oh, but I'll have a personal trainer to go up against, by Grayson's rules. I frown. I hate to exercise.

While driving, I try to cripple our email exchange. Sometimes he's a condescending son of a bitch. And then I think of Billie and I feel guilty. But of course, she wasn't his biological mother. Hmm, it's a whole world of unknown pain. Well, the condescending son of a bitch works fine then. Yes. I'm an adult, thank you for reminding me, Grayson Maury, and

it's my choice. Problem is, I just want Grayson, not all of his... luggage - and at the moment he has a 747 baggage compartment. Could I just lay down and kiss her like a submissive, I said I would try. This is a very big request.

I pull up to Eastwood's parking lot. As I walk in, I can hardly believe this is my last day. Fortunately, the store is busy and time flies. At lunchtime, Mr. Eastwood takes me off the reserve. He is standing next to a courier on a motorbike.

'Miss Black? asks the courier. I frown questioningly at Mr. Eastwood, who shrugs, as puzzled as I am. My heart sinks. What did Grayson send me now? I sign for the small package and open it right away. It's a BlackBerry. My heart squeezes more. I turn it on.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: BlackBerry READY

Date: May 27, 2009 11:15 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

I need to be able to contact you at any time, and since this is your most honest

form of communication, I figured you needed a BlackBerry.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Consumerism has gone mad

Date: May 27, 2009, 1:22 p.m.

To: Grayson Maury

I think you need to call Dr. LORENZO right away.

Your stalker tendencies are unleashed.

I am at work. I'll email you when I get home.

Thanks for another gadget.

I was not wrong when I said you were the ultimate consumer.

Why are you doing this?

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: The sagacity of such a young person

Date: May 27, 2009, 1:24 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Just well done, as always Miss Black.

Dr. LORENZO is on vacation.

And- I do this because I can.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I put the thing in my back pocket, I already hate it. Emailing Grayson is addictive, but I'm supposed to be working. He buzzes against my behind once... as appropriate, I think ironically, but summoning all my willpower, I ignore him.

At four o'clock Mr. and Mrs. Eastwood round up all the other employees of the shop, and in an embarrassing and curly speech, hand me a check for three hundred dollars.

At that point, three weeks - exams, graduation, intense and fucked up billionaires, deflowering, hard and soft boundaries, non-console game rooms, helicopter rides - and the fact that I'm moving tomorrow, all is well with me. Surprisingly, I stand together. My subconscious is in awe. I hug the Eastwoods. They have been kind and generous employers, and I will miss them.

Maury gets out of his car when I get home.

'What is that?' she said accusingly, pointing to the Audi. I can not resist.

'It's a car,' I say ironically. She narrows her eyes, and for a brief moment, I wonder if she's going to put me on her knee too. 'My graduation gift.' I try to be nonchalant. Yes, I get expensive cars every day. Her mouth opens.

'Generous, exaggerated bastard, isn't it?'

I agree.

'I tried not to take it, but frankly it just isn't worth it.'

Maury tightens his lips.

'No wonder you're so overwhelmed. I noticed he stuck.'

'Yes.' I smile wistfully.

'Have we finished packing?'

I nod and follow her inside. I'm checking Grayson's email.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Sunday

Date: May 27, 2009 1:40 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Should I see you at 1 p.m. Sunday?

The doctor will be in Escala to see you at 1:30 am.

I am leaving for New York now.

Hope your move goes well and look forward to Sunday.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Hell, he could be discussing the weather. I decided to email him once we're

done packing, he can be so much fun in a minute, then he can be so formal and stuffy. It's hard to follow. Honestly, it's like emailing an employee. I look up and join Maury to pack her bags.

Maury and I are in the kitchen when there is a knock on the door. Stephen stands on the porch, looking immaculate in his suit. I notice the trace of ex-army in his buzzing cut, his neat physique, and his cold gaze.

'Miss Black,' he said. 'I came for your car.'

'Oh yes, sure. Come in, I'll get the keys.'

It is surely beyond the call of duty. I wonder again about Stephen's job description. I give him the keys and we walk in uncomfortable silence for me - towards the light blue Ladybug. I open the door and remove the flashlight from the glove box. That's it...!

I have nothing else personal in Wanda. Goodbye, Wanda. Thank you. I stroke its roof as I close the passenger door.

'How long have you worked for Mr. Maury?' I ask.

'Four years, Miss Black.

Suddenly, I have an irresistible urge to bombard him with questions. What this man needs to know about Grayson, all his secrets. But then he probably signed an NDA.

I look at him nervously. He has the same taciturn expression as Ray, and I'm warm to him.

'He's a good man, Miss Black,' he said, and he smiled slightly. With that, he gives me a little nod, gets in my car, and walks away.

Apartment, Beetle, Eastwoods - everything has changed now. I shake my head as I walk inside. And the biggest change of all is Grayson Maury. Stephen thinks he's a good man.

Can I believe it?

Sam joins us with a Chinese dish at eight o'clock. Had finished. We are excited and ready to go. He brings several bottles of beer, and Maury and I sit on the couch while he's cross-legged on the floor

between us. We watch crappy TV, drink beer, and as the evening wears on us fondly and loudly remember the effect of beer. It's been a good four years.

The atmosphere between Sam and I returned to normal, the attempted kiss forgotten. Well, he's been swept under the carpet that my inner goddess is lying on, eating grapes and patting her fingers, not so patiently waiting for Sunday. There is a knock on the door and my heart jumps in my throat. Really?

Maury answers the door and is nearly run over by Jack. He grabs her in a Hollywood-style clinch that quickly turns into a European art-house embrace. Honestly… take a room. Sam and I look at each other. I am appalled at their lack of modesty.

'Shall we go down to the bar?' I ask Sam, who nods frantically. We're too uncomfortable with the rampant sexing going on in front of us. Maury looked up at me, red and his eyes shining.

'Sam and I are going for a drink.' I look up at her. Ha! I can still roll my eyes at my own pace.

'Alright,' she smiles.

'Hi Jack, bye Jack.'

He gives me a big blue eye, and Sam and I are outside, laughing like teenagers. Going down to the bar, I put my arm through Sam's. My God, it's so simple

- I hadn't enjoyed it before.

'You will always come to the opening of my show, won't you?'

'Of course, Sam, when is that?'

'June 9'

'What day is it?' I suddenly panic.

'It's a Thursday.'

'Yeah, I should do that... and you gonna visit us in New York?'

'Try to stop me.' He smiles.

It's late when I come home from the bar. Maury and Jack are nowhere but we can hear them. Holy shit. Hope I'm not that loud. I know Grayson isn't. I blushed at the thought and escaped to my room. After a brief hug not at all awkward, thank you, Sam left. I don't know when I will see him

again, probably his photo exhibit, and again I'm blown away that he finally has an exhibit. I will miss him and his boyish charm. I couldn't bring myself to tell him about the beetle, I know he will panic when he finds out, and I can only deal with one man at a time panicking at me. Once in my room, I check the average machine, and of course, there's an email from Grayson.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Where are you?

Date: May 27, 2009 10:14 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

'I am at work. I'll email you when I get home.

Are you still at work or have you packed your phone, BlackBerry, and MacBook?

Call me, or I might have to call Jack.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Shit... Sam... shit.

I take my phone. Five missed calls and one voice message. In the meantime, I listen to the message. It's Grayson.

'I think you need to learn so I get it done to my expectations. I am not a patient man. If you say you will contact me after the job is done, you should have the decency to do so. Otherwise, I worry, and it's not an emotion that I know and I don't tolerate it very well. Call me.'

Double shit. Will, he ever give me a break? I frown on the phone. He's choking me. With deep terror rolling in my stomach, I scroll to his number and press the dial. My heart is in my mouth as I wait for it to respond. He would probably like to beat me Seven Shades of Crap. The thought is depressing.

'Hi,' he said softly, and his response throws me off balance because I expect his anger, but if anything, he seems relieved.

'Hi,' I whisper.

'I was worried about you.'

'I know. I'm sorry I didn't answer, but I'm fine.'

He stops for a moment.

'Did you have a pleasant evening?' He is perfectly polite.

'Yes. We finished packing and Maury and I shared a Chinese takeout with Sam.' I close my eyes firmly as I say Sam's name. Grayson said nothing.

'And you?' I ask to fill the sudden deafening chasm of silence. I won't let him blame me for Sam.

Finally, he sighs.

'I went to a fundraising dinner. It was dull. I left as soon as I could.

He looks so sad and resigned. My heart sinks. I imagine him there are all those nights sitting at the piano in his huge living room and the unbearable bittersweet slenderness of the music he was playing.

'I wish you were here,' I whisper because I want to hold him in his arms. Appease him.

Even- if he doesn't leave me. I want his proximity.

'Do you?' he whispers. Holy mackerel. It doesn't sound like him, and my scalp stings with dawning apprehension.

'Yes,' I breathe. After an eternity, he sighs.

'Will I see you on Sunday?'

'Yes, Sunday,' I whispered, and a shiver ran through my body.

'Good evening.'

'Good night sir.'

My skill catches him off guard, I can tell by his strong inspiration.

'Good luck with your move tomorrow, Naddalin.' Her voice is soft. And we're both hanging on the phone like teenagers, neither of us wanting to hang up.

'You hang up,' I whisper. Finally, I can feel his smile.

'No, you hang up.' And I know he's smiling.

'I do not want to.'

'Me neither.'

'Were you very angry with me?

'Yes.'

'Are you still?'

'No.'

'So you're not going to punish me?'

'No, I'm a type of guy right now.'

'I noticed.'

'You can hang up now, Miss Black.'

'Do you really want me to do this, sir?'

'Go to bed, Naddalin.

'Yes sir.'

We both stay online.

'Do you think you will be able to do as you are told?' He is amused and exasperated at the same time.

'Maybe. We'll see after Sunday.' And I hit 'end' on the phone.

Jack stands up and admires his work. He reconnected our TV to the satellite system in our Pike Place Market apartment. Maury and I collapse on the couch laughing, in awe of his prowess with an electric drill. The flat-screen looks odd compared to the masonry in the converted warehouse, but I'll probably get used to it.

'See, baby, easy.' He smiles a wide, white-toothed smile at Maury, and she almost literally dissolves into the couch.

I look up at both of them.

'I would love to stay, baby, but my sister is back from Paris. It's a compulsory family dinner tonight.

'Can you come after?' Maury asks shyly, all sweet and non-Murray Like.

I get up and go to the kitchen under the pretext of unpacking one of the crates. They will become disgusting.

'I'll see if I can escape,' he promises.

'I'll go down with you.' Maury smiles.

'see yeah, Naddalin. Jack smiles.

'Goodbye, Jack. Say hello to Grayson for me.

'Just hello?' His eyebrows rise suggestively.

'Yes.' I rinse. He winks at me and I turn crimson as he follows Maury out of the apartment. Jack is adorable and so different from Grayson. He's warm, open, physical, very physical, too physical, with Maury. They can barely hold hands - to be honest, it's embarrassing - and I'm green with envy.

Maury returns about twenty minutes later with a pizza, and we sit, surrounded by crates, in our new open space, eating straight from the box. Maury's dad made us proud. The apartment is not large, but it is quite large, with three bedrooms and a large living space that overlooks the Pike Place market itself. It's all solid wood and red brick floors, and the kitchen tops are smooth concrete, very utilitarian, very now. We both love being in the heart of the city.

At eight o'clock, the entrance phone is buzzing. Maury leaps - and my heart leaps into my mouth.

'Delivery, Miss Black, Miss Smith.' DECEPTION flows freely and unexpectedly in my veins. It's not Grayson.

'Second floor, apartment two.'

Maury brings in the delivery guy. His mouth opens when he sees Maury, all skinny jeans, a t-shirt, hair piled high with escaping tendrils. It has this effect on men. He is holding a bottle of champagne with a helicopter-shaped balloon attached. She gives him a bright smile to send him on her way and starts reading the map to me.

Ladies, good luck in your new home, Grayson Murray. Maury shakes his head in disapproval. 'Why can't he just write' from Grayson's 'And what's with the weird helicopter balloon?' 'Fake and Gay. 'What?' 'Grayson took me to New York in his helicopter.' I shrug my shoulders. Maury looks at me speechless. I have to say - I love these occasions - Mary Smith, silent and stunned, they are so rare. I take a brief, luxurious moment to enjoy it. 'Yes, he has a helicopter, which he piloted himself,' I say proudly. 'Of course, that obscenely rich

bastard has a helicopter. Why didn't you tell me?' Maury looks at me accusingly, but she smiles, shaking her head in disbelief. 'I've had a lot on my mind lately.' She frowns. 'Are you going to be okay while I'm away?'

'Of course.' I respond reassuringly. New town, no job... crazy boyfriend. 'Did you give him our address?' No, but harassment is one of his specialties. 'I think, down to earth. Maury's brow furrows more.' Somehow I'm not surprised. He worries me, Naddalin. At least it's a glass of good champagne and it's fresh. 'Of course, only Grayson would send chilled champagne or ask his secretary to do it... or maybe Stephen. We open it right away and find our teacups - those were the last items to go. wrap. 'Bollinger Grande Annee Rose 1999, a great vintage.' I smile at Murray and we clink cups of tea. I wake up early to a gray Sunday morning after a surprisingly refreshing night's sleep and stay awake looking at my crates. You should be unwrapping them, my subconscious tormentors, chasing her harpy lips together. No... today is the day. My inner goddess is beside herself, hopping about at full length. Anticipation is heavy and heavy above my head like a dark tropical storm cloud. Butterflies flood my stomach - as well

as a darker, carnal and captivating ache as I try to imagine what he will do to me... and of course I have to sign this audit contract or I, don't hear the clicking of incoming mail from the mean machine on the floor next to my bed.

From: Grayson Murray Subject: My life in numbers Date: May 29, 2009, 8:04 AM To Naddalin Black If you are driving you will need this access code for the Escala underground garage: 146963 Park in bay 5 - he's one of mine. Elevator Code: 1880 Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: An Excellent Vintage Date: May 29, 2009, 8:08 AM To Grayson Maury Yes Sir. Heard. Thanks for the champagne and the Fake and Gay explosion, who is now strapped to my bed. Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: Envy Date: May 29, 2009, 8:11 AM To Naddalin Black You're welcome. Do not be late. Lucky Fake and Gay. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. I roll my eyes at his authority, but his last line makes me smile. I head to the bathroom, wondering if Jack came back last night and trying to hold me back. I can drive the Audi in high heels! At 12.55 p.m. precisely, I parked in the Escala garage and I parked in bay five. How

many berries does he have? The Audi SUV is there, the R8 and two smaller Audi SUVs... hmm.

I check my rarely worn mascara in the lighted vanity mirror in my sun visor. I didn't have one in the Beetle. Come on girl! My inner goddess has her pom-poms in her hand - she's in cheerleading mode. In the elevator's endless mirrors, I gaze at my plum dress, well - Maury's plum dress. The last time I wore it, he wanted to take it off. My body tensed at the thought. Oh my God, the feeling is just exquisite, and I catch my breath. I'm wearing the underwear Stephen bought me. I blush at the thought of his buzz-cut wandering the aisles of Agent Provocateur or wherever he bought it. The doors open and I face the hall of apartment number one. Stephen stands in front of the double doors as I step out of the elevator. 'Hello, Miss Black,' he said. 'Oh, please call me, Naddalin. 'Naddalin,' he smiles. 'Mr. Maury is waiting for you.' I bet he is. Grayson sits on the sofa in his living room reading the Sunday papers. He looks up as Stephen directs me to the living room.

The play is exactly as I remember it - I've been here for a week - but it's been so much longer. Grayson looks cool and

calm he looks heavenly. He wears a loose white linen shirt and jeans, no shoes or socks. Her hair is tousled and unkempt, and her gray eyes sparkle badly at me. He is incredibly handsome. He gets up and walks over to me, and appreciative amused smile on his beautiful sculpted lips. I stand still at the entrance of the room, paralyzed by its beauty and the sweet anticipation of what is to come. The familiar charge between us is there, slowly springing into my stomach, pulling me towards him. 'Hmm... that dress,' he whispered approvingly, looking at me. 'Welcome back, Miss Black,' he whispers, and squeezing my chin, he leans in and offers a soft, light kiss to my lips. The contact of his lips with mine reverberates throughout my body.

My breathing is blocked. 'Hi,' I whisper, rinsing off. 'You're on time. I like punctuality. Come on.' He takes my hand and leads me to the sofa. 'I wanted to show you something,' he says as we sit down. He hands me the New York Times. On page eight there is a photo of the two of us at the graduation ceremony in Pittsburgh together. Holy shit. I am in the newspaper. I check the caption. Grayson Maury and friend at the graduation ceremony in Pittsburgh at OVHS York. I laugh. 'So I'm

your 'friend' now.' 'So it would show. And it's in the newspaper, so it must be true.' He smiles. Sitting next to me, her whole body is turned towards me, one of her legs tucked under the other. Reaching out, he tucks my hair behind my ear with his long index finger. My body comes to life on contact, waiting and necesSarily.

-And-

'So, Naddalin, you have a much better idea of what I've been doing since you were last here.' 'Yes.' Where is he going with that? 'And yet you came back.' I nod shyly and his gray eyes shine. He shakes his head slightly as if he is struggling with the idea. 'Did you eat?' he asks unexpectedly. Shit. 'No.' 'You are hungry?' He tries not to look bored. 'Not for food,' I whisper, and his nostrils flare up slightly in reaction. He leans forward and whispers in my ear. 'You're still so impatient, Miss Black, and just letting you in on a little secret, too.' But Dr. Greene is due to come shortly. He sits up. 'I would like you to eat,' he scolds me softly. My hot blood is cooling. Holy cow - the doctor. I had forgotten. 'What can you tell me about Dr Greene?' I ask to distract us both. 'She's the best Ob / Gyn in New York.

What more can I say?' He shrugs his shoulders. 'I thought I was seeing your doctor, and don't tell me you're really a woman, because I won't believe you. He gives me a not ridiculous look. 'I think it's more appropriate for you to see a specialist. Isn't it?' he said softly. I agree. Saint Moses, if she's the best obstetrician / gynecologist, he scheduled her to see me on a Sunday - at noon! I can't begin to imagine how much it costs. Grayson suddenly frowns as if he remembers something unpleasant. 'Naddalin, my mom would like you to come to dinner tonight. I think Jack asks Maury that too.

I don't know how you feel about it. It will be strange for me to introduce my family to you. Odd Why? 'Are you ashamed of me?' I can't stop the injured from coming out of my voice. 'Of course not.' He rolls his eyes at me. 'Why is this weird?' 'Because I've never done it before.' 'Why are you allowed to roll your eyes, and I'm not?' He blinks. 'I didn't know I was.' 'Me neither, usually,' I told him. Grayson looks at me, speechless. Stephen appears at the door. 'Dr. Greene is here, sir.'

'Show her Miss Black room.' Miss Black room! 'Ready for contraception?' He

asks, standing up and holding out his hand to me. 'You're not going to come like' I gasped, shocked. He's laughing. 'I would pay a lot of money to watch, trust me, Naddalin, but I don't think the good doctor would approve.' I take his hand, and he pulls me into his arms and kisses me deeply. I clutch on his arms, taken by surprise. his hand is in my hair holding my head, and he pulls me against him, his forehead against mine. 'I'm so happy that you 'I'm here,' he whispers. 'I can't wait to get you naked.

Dr. Greene is tall, blond, and immaculate, wearing a royal blue suit. I remember the women who work in Grayson's office. She's like an identikit model - another blonde from Stepford. Her long hair is swept back into an elegant bun. She must be in her early forties.

'Mr. Maury. She shakes Grayson's outstretched hand.

'Thanks for coming on such short notice,' says Grayson.

'Thanks for making it worth it, Mr. Maury. Miss Black.' She smiles, her eyes cold and evaluating.

We shake hands, and I know she's one of those women who won't readily tolerate fools. Like Maury. I like it right away. She gives Grayson a sharp look, and after an awkward kick, he takes his cue.

'I'll be downstairs,' he mumbles and leaves what will be my room.

'Well, Miss Black. Mr. Maury pays me a small fortune to take care of you. What can I do for you?

After careful consideration and a long discussion, Dr. Greene and I decide on the mini pill. She writes me a prepaid prescription and asks me to pick them up tomorrow. I love her no-frills attitude - she taught me until she was as blue as her dress about taking it at the same time every day. And I can say she's burning with curiosity about my alleged relationship with Mr. Maury. I don't give him any details. Somehow, I don't think she would look so calm and collected if she had seen her room red with pain. I blush as we walk through his closed door and walk back down to the art gallery which is Grayson's living room.

Grayson is reading, sitting on his couch. A breathtaking tune plays over the music system, swirling around it, cocooning

it, filling the room with a sweet and moving song.

For a moment, he looks serene. He turns and looks at us as we walk in and smiles warmly at me.

'Have you finished?' he asks as if he's interested. He points the remote at an elegant white box under the fireplace that houses his iPod, and the exquisite melody fades but continues in the background. Standing, he walks towards us.

'Yes, Mr. Maury. Take care of her; she is a beautiful and bright young woman.'

Grayson is taken aback - so am I. What an inappropriate thing for a doctor to say. Does she give him some not-so-subtle warning that Grayson is recovering?

'I have every intention of doing it,' he mumbles, puzzled.

Looking at him, I shrug, embarrassed.

'I'll send you my bill,' she said dryly, shaking his hand.

'Good day and good luck to you, Naddalin.' She smiles, her eyes narrowed as she does when we shake hands.

Stephen appears out of nowhere to escort her through the double doors and to the elevator. How does he do this? Where is he hiding?

'How was it?' Grayson asks.

'Alright, thank you. She said I should refrain from all sexual activity for the next four weeks.' The mouth of Grayson opens up in shock, and I can't keep a straight face and smile at him like an idiot anymore.

'I got you!'

He narrows his eyes and I immediately stop laughing. He looks rather off-putting. Oh shit. My subconscious curdles in the corner as all the blood drains from my face, and I imagine her getting onto her knee again.

'I got you!' he said with a smirk. He grabs me around my waist and pulls me against him. 'You are incorrigible, Miss Black,' he whispers, fixing my eyes as he weaves his fingers through my hair, holding

me firmly in place. He kisses me hard, and I hold onto his muscular arms for support.

'As much as I would like to take you here, now you need to eat and so do I.' I don't want you to pass out later, 'he whispered against my lips.

'Is that all you want from me for - my body?' I whisper.

'That and your smart mouth,' he breathes.

He kisses me passionately again, then releases me abruptly, taking my hand and leading me to the kitchen. I am in shock. One minute we're joking and the next... I wake up my heated face. It's just sex on my legs, and now I have to regain my balance and eat something. The air always plays in the background.

'What's the music?'

'Villa Lobos, an aria by Bachianas Brasileiras. Good, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I whisper in total agreement.

The breakfast bar is suitable for two; Grayson takes a bowl from the fridge.

'Chicken Caesar salad, does it go with you?'

Oh, thank goodness nothing too heavy.

'Yes very good thank you.'

I watch him move Billie fully around his kitchen. He's so comfortable with his body on some level, but then he doesn't like to be touched... so maybe deep down he's not. No man is an island, I think - except maybe Grayson Maury.

'What are you thinking about?' he asks, pulling me out of my reverie. I rinse.

'I was just watching the way you move.'

He raises an eyebrow, amused.

'And?' He said dryly.

I hunt a little more.

'You are very gracious.'

'Why thank you, Miss Black,' he whispers. He sits next to me, holding a bottle of wine. 'Chablis?

'Please.'

'Help yourself to the salad,' he said softly.

'Tell me - which method did you choose?'

I am momentarily overwhelmed by his question, when I realize that he is talking about Dr. Greene's visit: 'Mini pill'.

He frowns.

'And will you remember to take it regularly, at the right time, every day?'

Jeez... of course, I will. How does he know I blush at the thought, probably one or more of the fifteen.

'I'm sure you'll remind me,' I whisper dryly.

He looks at me with amused condescension.

'I'll put an alarm on my calendar.' He smiles. 'Eat.'

Chicken Cabana is delicious. To my surprise, I am hungry and for the first time since I have been with him, I finish my meal before him. The wine is lively, clean, and fruity.

'More impatient than ever, Miss Black?' He smiles at my empty plate.

I look at him under my eyelashes.

'Yes,' I whisper.

His breath stops. And as he looks at me, I feel the atmosphere between us slowly changing, evolving... charging. His gaze changes from dark to scorching, taking me with him.

He stands up, narrows the distance between us, and pulls me from my barstool into his arms.

'Do you want to do this?' he breathes, looking at me attentively.

'I didn't sign anything.'

'I know - but I'm breaking all the rules these days.'

'Are you going to hit me?'

'Yes, but it won't be to hurt you.' I don't want to punish you right now. If you had caught me last night, well, that would have been a different story.

Holy cow. He wants to hurt me… how do you deal with this? I can't hide the horror on my face.

'Don't let anyone try to convince you otherwise, Naddalin. One of the reasons people like me do this is because we like to give or receive pain. It's very simple.

‘You don't, so I spent a lot of time yesterday thinking about it.'

11

He pulls me against him, and his erection is buried in my stomach. I should run, but I can't. I am drawn to him on a deep elementary level, which I cannot begin to understand

'Did you draw any conclusions?' I whisper.

'No, and now I just want to tie you up and fuck you for no reason. Are you ready for this?'

'Yeah,' I breathe as everything in my body tightens at the same time… wow.

'Good. Come on.' He takes my hand and leaves all the dirty dishes on the breakfast counter, and we go upstairs.

My heart begins to beat. That's it. I'm going to do this. My inner goddess spins like a world-class ballerina, pirouette after pirouette. He opens the door to his playroom, stands back for me to pass through, and I'm back in the red room of pain. It's the same, the smell of leather, citrus, polish and dark wood, all very sensual. My blood runs hot and frightened through my system - adrenaline mixed with desire and desire. It's a heady and powerful cocktail. Grayson's stance has completely changed, subtly altered, tougher, and meaner. He looks at me and his eyes are heated, lustful... hypnotic.

'When you're here, you're completely mine,' he hisses, each word slow and measured. 'To do as I see fit. Do you understand?'

His gaze is so intense. I nod, my mouth dry, my heart pounding for a way out of my chest.

'Take off your shoes,' he orders softly.

I swallow, and rather awkwardly, I take them. He leans, picks them up, and places them next to the door...

Don't hesitate when I ask you to do something. Now I'm going to take you off that dress. Something I wanted to do for a few days if I remember correctly. I want you to be comfortable with your body, Naddalin. You have a beautiful body and I love to watch it.

It is a joy to see. I could watch you all day, and I want you unashamedly and unashamed of your nudity. Do you understand? '

'Yes.'

'Yeah, what?' He leans over me, staring.

'Yes sir.'

'Do you mean that?' He snaps.

'Yes sir.'

'Good. Lift your arms above your head.'

I do as instructed, and he bends down and grabs the hem. Slowly, he lifts my dress over my thighs, hips, stomach,

breasts, shoulders, and above my head. He stands again to examine me and absently folds my dress, not taking his eyes off me.

He places it on the big chest next to the door. Able to reach, he pulls on my chin, his touch drying me out.

'Bite your lip,' he hisses. 'You know what it does to me,' he adds darkly. 'Turn around. '

I turn around immediately, without hesitation. He unfastened my bra then took the two straps, pulled them slowly down my arms, rubbing my skin with his fingers and the tips of his miniatures as he slid my bra down. His touch makes my spine shiver, awakening every nerve ending in my body. He's standing behind me, so close that I feel the heat radiating from him, warming me, warming me all over. He pulls my hair so that everything hangs behind my back, grabs a handful of it at the back of my neck, and angels my head to one side. He runs his nose down my exposed neck, inhaling completely, then up to my ear. The muscles of my stomach contract, carnal and eager. Hell, he barely touched me, and I want to.

'You still smell so divine, Naddalin,' he whispered, placing a soft kiss under my ear.

I moan.

'Calm,' he breathes. 'Do not make noise.'

Pulling my hair behind me, to my surprise, he begins to braid it into a large braid, his fingers quick and dexterous. He ties him up with an invisible tie when he's done and pulls him quickly so I'm forced to come back against him.

'I love your braided hair here,' he whispers.

Hmm... For what?

He lets go of my hair.

'Turn around,' he orders.

I do what I want, my shallow breathing, fear, and desire blend together. It's an intoxicating mixture.

'When I tell you to come here, that's how you dress. Just in panties. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'Yes what?' He looks at me.

'Yes sir.'

A hint of a smile lifts the corner of his mouth.

'Good girl.' His eyes burn in mine. 'When I tell you to come here, I expect you to kneel there.' He points to a place next to the door. 'Do it now.'

I blink- as I process his words, turn and kneel rather awkwardly as directed.

'You can sit on your heels.'

I sit.

'Place your hands and forearms flat on your thighs. Good. Now separate your knees.

Wider. Wider. Perfect. Look at the ground. '

He walks up to me and I can see his feet and shins in my line of sight. Barefoot.

I should take some notes if he wants me to remember them. He leans in and grabs my braid again, then pulls my

head back so that I look at him. It just isn't painful.

'Will you remember that position, Naddalin?'

'Yes sir.'

'Good. Stay here, don't move.' He leaves the room.

I am on my knees, I wait. Where did he go? What will he do to me? I have no idea how long he leaves me like this... a few minutes, five, ten My breathing becomes shallower, anticipation devours me from within.

-And-

Suddenly he's back - and all at the same time I'm calmer and more excited in the same breath. Could I be more excited, I can see his feet. He changed his jeans. These are older, torn, soft, and over-washed. Holy cow. These jeans are hot. He closes the door and hangs something in the back.

'Good girl, Naddalin. You look lovely like that. Nice job. Get up.'

I get up, but I keep my face down.

'You can look at me.'

I look at him, and he looks at me intently, assessing, but his eyes soften. He took off his shirt. Oh my... I want to touch it. The button on the top of his jeans is undone.

'I'm going to chain you now, Naddalin. Give me your right hand.

I give him my hand. He turns it palm up, and before I know it, he smashes the center with a whip I hadn't noticed in his right hand. It happens so quickly that the surprise barely registers. Even more amazing - it doesn't hurt. Well, not a lot, just a slight prick.

'What does it do?' he asks.

I blink at him, confused.

'Answer me now.'

'Okay.' I frown.

'Don't frown.'

I blink and try to be unmoved. I succeed.

'Does it hurt?

'No.'

'It's not going to hurt. Do you understand?'

'Yes.' My voice is uncertain. Isn't that going to hurt?

'I think so,' he said.

Jeez, my breathing is so shallow. Does he know what I'm thinking? He shows me the harvest. It's brown braided leather. My eyes are raised to meet hers, and they are lit with fire and a hint of amusement.

'We want to please, Miss Black,' he whispers. 'Come.' He takes my elbow and moves me under the gate. He reaches out and unhooks a few chains with black leather cuffs. 'This grid is designed for the chains to move through the grid.'

I look up. Holy shit - it's like a subway map.

'We're going to start here, but I want to fuck you on your feet. Then we'll end up at the wall over there.' He shows with the whip where the large wooden X is on the wall.

'Put your hands above your head.'

I immediately force it, feeling like I'm stepping out of my body - a casual observer of events unfolding around me. It is beyond fascinating, beyond the erotic. It is singularly the most exciting and scary thing I have ever done. I confide in a handsome man who, by his admission, makes numerous Shadows of fucked up. I suppress the brief thrill of fear. Maury and Jack, they know I'm here.

He stands very close as he ties the wrists. I look at his chest. Its proximity is heavenly. He smells of shower gel and Grayson, an intoxicating mixture, and it brings me back to the present. I want to run my nose and my tongue through this handful of chest hair.

I might just lean forward...

He pulls back and looks at me, his hooded, salacious, carnal expression, and I'm helpless with my hands tied, but just looking at his pretty face, reading his urge and languishing, I can feel the wetness between my legs. He walks slowly around me.

'You look very well tied up like that, Miss Black. And your smart, calm mouth for the moment. I like it.'

Standing in front of me again, he hooks his fingers into my panties, and at a very calm pace, peels them down my legs, slowly undressing me excruciatingly, so that he ends up kneeling in front of me. me. Keeping his eyes on mine, he rubs my panties in his hand, holds them to his nose, and inhales deeply. Holy shit. Did he just do that? He smiles nastily at me and puts them in his jeans pocket.

Unrolling from the ground, rising lazily, like a jungle cat, he points the tip of the whip at my navel, quietly rounding it - tempting me. In contact with the leather, I shudder and gasp. He walks around me again, dragging the crop down the middle of my body. On his second home run, he suddenly lashes out, and he hits me under my butt... against my cock. I scream in surprise as all my nerve endings are at attention. I shoot against the detentions. Shock goes through me, and it's the strangest, sweetest hedonistic feeling.

'Calm,' he whispered as he walked around me again, the crop slightly higher in the middle of my body. This time, when he throws it against me in the same place, I wait for him... oh my there. My body is convulsing at the sweet, prickly bite.

As he makes his way around me, he grazes again, this time hitting my nipple, and I throw my head back as my nerve endings sing. He strikes the other... a brief, quick and gentle retribution. My nipples harden and lengthen from the assault, and I moan loudly, tugging at my leather wrists.

'Does it feel good?' he breathes.

'Yes.'

He hits me on the butt again. The harvest stings this time.

'Yes what?'

'Yes, sir,' I moan.

He stops... but I can't see him anymore. My eyes are closed as I try to absorb the myriad sensations that run through my body. Very slowly, it's raining little biting licks of the crop down my stomach, heading south. I know where this leads, and I'm trying to get my psyche on - but when he hits my clit, I scream.

'Oh please!' I moan.

'Silence,' he orders, and he hits me on the butt again.

I didn't expect it to be like this... I'm lost. Lost in a sea of sensations. And suddenly, he drags the crop against my cock, through my pubic hair, to the entrance of my vagina.

'Look how wet you are for this, Naddalin. Open your eyes and mouth.

I do as I am told, completely seduced. It pushes the tip of the crop into my mouth, like my dream. Holy shit.

'See how you taste. Suck. Suck hard, baby.'

My mouth closes around the crop as my eyes focus on his. I can taste the rich leather and the salty taste of my excitement. His eyes are blazing. He is in his element.

He removes the tip of my mouth, and he stands forward and grabs me and kisses me hard, his tongue invading my mouth. Wrapping his arms around me, he pulls me against him. His chest crushes

mine, and I want to touch, but I can't, my hands, useless above me.

'Oh, Naddalin, you taste very good,' he hisses. 'Shall I bring you over?'

'Please,' I beg you.

The crop bites my buttock. Oh!

'Please what?'

'Please, sir,' I moan.

He smiles at me, triumphant.

'With that?' He's holding the crop so I can see it

'Yes sir.'

'Are you sure?' He looks at me sternly.

'Yes, please, sir.'

'Close your eyes.'

I closed the room, he... the harvest. He starts again with small licks against my stomach. On the way down, soft little licks against my clit, once, twice, three times, over and over, until finally, it's there - I can't take it anymore - and I arrive, gloriously, loudly, weakly sagging. His arms

wrap around me as my legs turn to jelly. I dissolve in his embrace, my head against his chest, and meow and moan as the aftershocks of my orgasm devour me. He lifts me, and all of a sudden we move, my arms still tied above my head, and I can feel the cool wood of the polished cross on my back, and he pops the buttons on his jeans. He rests me briefly against the cross as he slides over a condom, then his hands wrap around my thighs as he lifts me again.

'Lift your legs, baby, wrap them around me.'

I feel so weak, but I do as he asks by wrapping my legs around his hips and positioning myself under me. Suddenly he's inside me, and I scream again, listening to his muffled moan in my ear. My arms rest on his shoulders as he sinks into me. Jeez, it's deep like that. He pushes again and again, his face against my neck, his breathing hard against my throat. I feel the accumulation again. Jeez no… not yet… I don't think my body will withstand another upsetting moment. But I have no choice… and with a fatality that becomes familiar, I let go and come back, and it's sweet, scary, and intense.

I lose all sense of myself. Grayson follows him, screaming his release through clenched teeth and holding me tight and tight as he does.

He quickly comes out of me and leans me against the cross, his body supporting mine. Unbuckle the handcuffs, he frees my hands and we both fall to the ground. He pulls me onto his knees, cradling me, and I lean my head against his chest. If I had the strength, I would touch him, but not me. Later, I realize that he is still wearing his jeans.

'Good job, baby,' he whispers. 'Does it hurt?'

'No,' I breathe. I can barely keep my eyes open. Why am I so tired?

'Did you expect that?' he whispers as he hugs me, his fingers brushing back a few strands of hair that have escaped my face.

'Yes.'

'You see most of your fear is in your head, Naddalin,' he pauses. 'Would you do it again?'

I think for a moment as fatigue clouds my brain... Again?

'Yes.' My voice is so sweet.

He hugs me tightly.

'Good. Me too,' he whispers, then leans in and gently kisses the top of my head. 'And I'm not done with you yet.'

Not finished with me yet. Saint Moses. I can't do anything more. I am completely exhausted and struggle with an overwhelming urge to sleep. I'm leaning against his chest, my eyes closed, and he's wrapped around me - arms and legs - and I feel... safe and so comfortable. Will, he let me sleep, maybe to dream? My mouth tightens at the silly thought, and turning my face into Grayson's chest, I inhale his unique scent and caress it, but immediately it tenses up... Oh shit. I open my eyes and look at him. He looks at me.

'No,' he hisses in a warning.

I blush and gaze at her chest longingly. I want to run my tongue through his hair, kiss him, and for the first time, I notice he has a few random, faint little round scars dotted around his chest. Chickenpox, fairies, I thought distractedly.

'Kneel by the door,' he orders, sitting back, putting his hands on his knees, effectively freeing me. No longer warm, the temperature of his voice dropped several degrees.

I awkwardly stumble to my feet, walk to the door, and kneel as instructed. I am shaking and very, very tired, monumentally confused. Who would have thought that I could have found such satisfaction in this room? Who would have thought it would be so exhausting? My limbs are deliciously heavy, full. My inner goddess does not disturb signs outside his room.

Grayson moves to the periphery of my vision. My eyes are starting to sag.

'Are you bored, am I, Miss Black?'

I jump, and Grayson stands in front of me, his arms crossed looking at me. Oh, shit, caught taking a nap - it's not gonna be good. His eyes soften as I watch him.

'Get up,' he orders.

I carefully climb to my feet. He looks at me and his mouth quivers. 'You are broken, aren't you?' I nod shyly, blushing. 'Endurance, Miss Black.' He narrows his

eyes at me. 'I haven't had my fill of you yet. Stretch your hands out in front as if you were praying.' I blink at him. Pray! I pray that you will go easy with me. I do what I'm told. He takes a cable tie and ties it around my wrists, tightening the plastic. Good heavens. My eyes fly to hers. 'Sounds familiar,' he asks, unable to hide his smile. Damn... the plastic cable ties. Restocking at Eastwood's! Everything becomes clear. I watch him as the adrenaline rushes through my body again. Okay - that caught my attention - I'm awake now. 'I have scissors here.' He holds them out so that I can see them. 'I can get you out of this in a moment.'

I try to part my wrists, test my ties, and as I do, the plastic bites into my flesh - it's painful, but if I relax my wrists they're okay - the tie doesn't cut my skin. 'Come.' He takes my hands and leads me to the four-poster bed. I now notice that it has dark red leaves on it and a shackle on each corner. 'I want more - a lot, a lot more,' he leans in and whispers in my ear. And my heart starts to beat again. Oh, man. 'But I'll be quick. You're tired. Hang on to the post,' he said. I frown. Not on the bed, I find I can spread my hands apart as I grab the richly carved wooden pole. 'Lower,' he orders.

'Good. Don't let go. If you do, I'll spank you. Understand?' 'Yes sir.' 'Good.' He stands behind me and grabs my hips, then quickly lifts me back so that I lean forward, holding the pole. 'Don't let go, Naddalin,' he warns. 'I'm going to fuck you hard from behind. Hold the post to support your weight. Understood?' 'Yes.' He hits me on the bottom with his hand. Ouch... it stings. 'Yes sir,' I mumble quickly. 'Spread your legs.' He puts his leg between mine, and holding my hips, he pushes my right leg to the side. 'It's better. After that, I'll let you sleep.' I am panting. I don't think about sleep now. He reaches out and gently strokes my back.

'You have such beautiful skin, Naddalin,' he huffed, leaning down and kissing me along my spine, soft kisses that were light as feathers. At the same time, his hands move to my forehead throbbing my breasts, and as he does, he traps my nipples between his fingers and pulls them gently. I stifle my moan as I feel my whole body respond, relive once more for him. He gently bites and sucks my waist, tugging at my nipples, and my hands tighten around the beautifully sculpted post. His hands drop and I hear the now familiar tear in the foil, and he pulls off his jeans. 'You have such a captivating and sexy ass, Naddalin

Black. What I would love to do about it.' His hands smooth and shape each of my butt cheeks, then his fingers slide down, and he slides two fingers inside of me. 'So wet. You never disappoint, Miss Black,' he whispers, and I hear the wonder in his voice. 'Hold on... it's gonna be quick, baby.' He grabs my hips and positions himself, and I brace myself for his assault. But he reaches out to me and grabs my braid towards the end and wraps it around his wrist up to my neck, holding my head in place. Very slowly, he creeps inside me, pulling my hair at the same time... oh fullness. He slowly pulls away from me, and his other hand grabs my hip, holding it tight, then he slams into me, pulling me forward.

'Wait, Naddalin! he cries through clenched teeth. I grip tighter around the post and push him back against him as he continues his ruthless assault, over and over again, his fingers digging into my hip. My arms hurt, my legs are uncertain, my scalp hurts from pulling my hair... and I can feel a gathering deep inside me. Oh no... and for the first time, I am afraid of my orgasm... if I come... I will collapse. Grayson continues to move roughly against me, inside me, his breathing hoarse, moaning, moaning. My body reacts... how I

feel about the acceleration. But suddenly Grayson comes to a stop, slamming deeply. 'Come on, Naddalin, give it to me,' he moans, and my name on his lips makes me lose my mind as I become the whole body and the spiraling feeling and the sweet and sweet release, then completely and completely. stupid. When the meaning returns, I lie on it. He's on the floor, and I'm lying on top of him with my back to him, and I'm looking at the ceiling, all post-coitus, say, broken. Oh... the carabiners, I thought absently - I had forgotten those. Grayson rubs my ear. 'Raise your hands,' he said softly. I feel like my arms are lead, but I hold them. He wields the scissors and passes a blade under the plastic. 'I declare this Naddalin open,' he breathes and cuts the plastic. I laugh and rub my wrists as they are released. I can feel his smile. 'It's such a lovely sound,' he said wistfully. He suddenly sits up, taking me with him to sit on his lap again. 'It's my fault,' he said, moving me so he could rub my shoulders and arms. Slowly it massages a bit of life into my limbs. What? I look at him behind me, trying to figure out what he means.

'That you don't laugh more often.' 'I'm not a big laugh,' I mumble sleepily. 'Oh, but when that happens, Miss Black, it's a

wonder and a joy to see.' 'Very flowery, Mr. Maury,' I mumble, trying to keep my eyes open. His eyes soften and he smiles. 'I would say you are completely fucked and need some sleep.' 'It wasn't flowery at all,' I growled playfully. He smiles and gently lifts me off him and stands up, gloriously naked. I momentarily wish I was more awake to appreciate it. Picking up his jeans, he puts them back on, commando. 'I don't want to scare Stephen, or Ms. Jones for that matter,' he mumbles. Hmm... they must know what a perverted bastard he is. The thought worries me. He leans in to help me up and leads me to the door, on the back of which hangs a Maury waffle robe. He patiently dresses me as if I were a little child. I don't have the strength to lift my arms. When I'm covered and respectable he leans in and kisses me softly, his mouth twisting into a smile. 'Bed,' he said. Oh… no… 'To sleep,' he adds reassuringly when he sees my expression. Suddenly he picks me up and carries me curled up against his chest to the room along the hall where earlier in the day Dr. Greene examined me. My head falls against his chest. I'm exhausted. I don't remember ever having been so tired. Pulling the quilt, he lays me down and, even more surprisingly, climbs

up beside me and hugs me. 'Sleep now, beautiful girl,' he whispers and kisses my hair. And before I can make a facetious comment, I sleep.

Soft lips brush my temple, leaving soft tender kisses in their wake, and part of me wants to turn around and respond, but mostly I want to stay asleep. I moan and sink into my pillow.

'Naddalin, wake up. Grayson's voice is soft, coaxing.

'No,' I moan.

'We have to leave in half an hour for dinner with my parents.' He is amused.

I reluctantly open my eyes. It's twilight outside. Grayson is leaning over and looking at me intently.

'Go on with your head asleep. Get up.' He leans in and kisses me again.

'I bought you a drink. I'll be downstairs. Don't go back to sleep, or you'll be in trouble, 'he threatens, but his tone is soft. He kisses me briefly and walks out, letting me blink sleepily in the cold, stark room.

I am refreshed but suddenly nervous. Holy cow, I meet his parents! He just worked me up with a riding crop and tied me up with a cable tie that I sold him, for heaven's sake - and I'm going to meet his parents. This will be the first time Maury meets them too - at least she will be there to support him. I roll my shoulders. They are stiff. His requests for a personal trainer don't seem so weird anymore now, in fact, they are mandatory if I am to have any hope of following him.

I slowly climb out of bed and find that my dress hangs outside the closet and my bra is resting on the chair. Where are my panties, I check under the chair. Nothing. Then I remember - he had the squirrel in his jeans pocket. I rinse off the memory, after him, I can't even bring myself to think about it, he was so - barbaric. I frown. Why didn't he give me back my panties?

I steal into the bathroom, baffled by my lack of underwear. Drying myself off after my pleasant but far too brief shower, I realize that he did it on purpose. He wants me to be embarrassed and ask for my panties, and he'll either say yes or no. My inner goddess smiles at me. Hell… two can

play this particular game. Deciding on the spot not to ask him for them and not to give him this satisfaction, I will go to meet his parents without panties. Naddalin Black! My subconscious is berating me, but I don't want to listen to it - I almost hug in glee because I know it will drive it crazy.

Back in the bedroom, I put on my bra, put on my dress, and climb into my shoes. I take the braid off and brush my hair in a hurry, then look at the drink I have left.

It is pale pink. What is it: cranberries and sparkling water? Hmm... it tastes delicious and quenches my thirst.

Back in the bathroom, I look at myself in the mirror: eyes shining, cheeks slightly red, looking slightly smug from my panty plan, and I go downstairs. Fifteen minutes. Not bad, Naddalin.

Grayson is standing by the panoramic window, dressed in the Murray flannel pants that I adore, the ones that hang in this incredibly sexy way on his hips, and of course, a white linen shirt. Doesn't it have other colors? Frank Sinatra sings softly over the surround speakers

Grayson turns and smiles as I enter. He looks at me expectantly.

'Hi,' I say softly, and my sphinx smile meets his.

'Hi,' he said. 'How are you?' Her eyes shine with amusement.

'Good thank you?'

'I feel very good, Miss Black.

He's so waiting for me to say something.

'Frank. I never figured you out for a Sinatra fan.'

He raises his eyebrows at me, his air of speculation.

'Eclectic taste, Miss Black,' he whispers, and he walks towards me like a panther until he is standing in front of me, his gaze so intense it takes my breath away.

Frank starts to sing... an old song, one of Ray's favorites. 'Witchcraft.' Grayson quietly traces his fingers along my cheek, and I can feel it down.

'Dance with me,' he whispers hoarsely.

Taking the remote control out of his pocket, he turns up the volume and holds out his hand to me, his gray eyes full of promise, envy, and humor. He is totally attractive and I am bewitched. I place my hand in his. He smiles at me lazily and pulls me into his hug, his arms wrapping around my waist, and he begins to sway.

I put my free hand on his shoulder and smiled at him, caught in his contagious, cheerful mood. And he starts to move. Boy, can he dance? We cover the floor, from the window to the kitchen and back, swirling and spinning to the beat of the music. And it allows me to follow it so easily.

We slide around the dining table, towards the piano, and back and forth past the glass wall, New York sparkles outside, a dark and magical mural to our dance, and I can't help but laugh. carefree. He smiles at me as the song draws to a close.

'There is no nicer witch than you,' he whispers, then kisses me softly. 'Well, that brought some color to your cheeks, Miss Black. Thanks for dancing. Shall we meet my parents?'

'You're welcome, and yes, I can't wait to meet them,' I replied breathlessly.

'Do you have everything you need?

'Oh, yes,' I replied gently.

'Are you sure?'

I nod as casually as possible. I do so under his intense and amused shruti Pittsburgh. His face splits into a huge smile and he shakes his head.

'Okay. If that's how you want to play it, Miss Black.'

He grabs my hand, picks up his jacket from one of the bar stools, and leads me through the lobby to the elevator. Oh, the many faces of Grayson Maury. Can I ever understand this mercurial man?

I watch him in the elevator. He enjoys a private joke, a trace of a smile flirting with his beautiful mouth. I fear it will be at my expense. What was I thinking? I am going to see his parents and I am not wearing any underwear. My subconscious gives me an unnecessary expression that I told you. In the relative safety of his apartment, it seemed like a fun and teasing idea. Now I'm almost outside without panties! He looks at me, and this is the load that rises between us. The amused look

disappears from his face and his expression darkens, his eyes dark... oh there.

The elevator doors open on the ground floor. Grayson shakes his head slightly as if to clear his thoughts and motion for me to come out in front of him in the nicest way.

Who is he kidding? He's not a gentleman. He has my panties.

Stephen draws in the big Audi. Grayson opens the back door for me and I climb inside as elegantly as I can, considering my state of undressing gratuitously. I am thankful that Maury's plum dress is so tacky and that it hangs at the top of my knees.

We accelerate the I-5, both quiet, no doubt inhibited by the constant presence of Stephen at the front. Grayson's mood is almost tangible and seems to change, the humor slowly dissipating as we head north. He ruminates, looks out the window, and I can feel him slip away. What is he thinking, I can't ask him? What can I say in front of Stephen?

'Where did you learn to dance?' I ask shyly. He turns to look at me, his eyes

unreadable in the intermittent light of the passing streetlights.

'Do you really want to know?' he answers softly.

My heart sinks, and now I don't because I can guess.

'Yes,' I grudgingly whisper.

'Mrs. MLF stifflers mom loved to dance.'

Oh, my worst suspicions have come true. She taught him well, and the thought depresses me - I can't teach her anything. I have no special skills.

'She must have been a good teacher.'

'She was,' he said softly.

My scalp itches. Did she get the best of him? Before it got so closed Or did she pull it out on its own? It has such a fun and playful side to it. I smiled involuntarily as I remembered being in his arms as he spun me around his living room, so unexpected, and he had my panties on somewhere.

-And-

Then there is the Red Room of Pain. I rub my wrists reflexively - thin strips of plastic will do this to a girl. She taught him all that too or ruined him, depending on his point of view. Or maybe he would have found his way there anyway despite Ms. R.

I realize, then, that I hate her. I hope I will never meet her because I will not be responsible for my actions if I do. I don't remember ever feeling this passionately about anyone, especially someone I have never met. Looking out the window blindly, I feed my irrational anger and jealousy.

My mind goes back to the afternoon. Based on what I understand of his preferences, I think he was easy on me. Would I do it again? I can't even pretend to argue against it. Of course, I would, if he asked me - as long as he didn't hurt me and if that's the only way to be with him.

This is essential. I want to be with him. My inner goddess sighs in relief. I conclude that she rarely uses her brain to think but another vital part of her anatomy, and at the moment, it's a rather exposed part.

'No,' he whispers.

I frown and turn to look at him.

'Not what?' I didn't touch it.

'Think too much about things, Naddalin.' Reaching out, he grabs my hand, brings it to his lips, and gently kisses my knuckles. 'I had a wonderful afternoon. Thank you.'

-And-

He's back with me. I blink at him and smile shyly. He's so confusing. I'm asking a question that bothers me.

'Why did you use a cable tie?'

He smiles at me.

'It's quick, it's easy, and it's something different to feel and experience. I know they're pretty brutal, and I like that in a restraint.' He smiles slightly at me.

'Very effective at keeping you in your place.'

I blushed and glanced nervously at Stephen, who remained unmoved, his eyes riveted on the road. What am I supposed to say that Grayson innocently shrugs.

'It's all part of my world, Naddalin.' He shakes my hand and off we go, looking out the window again.

It’s world indeed, and I want to belong to it, but on its terms, I just don't know. He didn't mention that damn contract. My inner thoughts do nothing to cheer me up. I look out the window and the scenery has changed. We cross one of the bridges, surrounded by inky darkness. The dark knight reflects my introspective mood, drawing closer, suffocating.

I take a brief coup d ' eye in Grayson, and he looks at me.

'Penny for your thoughts?' He asks.

I sigh and frown.

'It's bad, isn't it?'

'I wish I knew what you were thinking.'

He gives me a smirk.

'Ditto, baby,' he says quietly as Stephen rushes into the night towards Bellevue.

It's just before eight o'clock when the Audi enters the driveway of a colonial-style mansion.

It is breathtaking, even to the roses around the door. Perfect picture book.

'Are you ready for this?' Grayson asks as Stephen pulls up to the impressive front door.

I nod, and he gives me another reassuring squeeze.

'First for me too,' he whispers, then smirks nastily. 'I bet you'd like to wear your underwear right now,' he teases.

I rinse. I had forgotten my missing panties. Fortunately, Stephen got out of the car and opened my door so as not to hear our exchange. I frown at Grayson who grins broadly as he turns and exits the car.

Dr. Billie Trevelyan-Maury is on the doorstep waiting for us. She looks elegantly sophisticated in a pale blue silk dress; behind her is Mr. Maury, I presume, tall, blond, and as handsome in his way as Grayson.

'Naddalin, you met my mother, Billie. This is my father, Carrick.

'Mr. Maury, what a pleasure to meet you. I smile and squeeze his outstretched hand.

'The pleasure is mine, Naddalin.'

'Please call me, Naddalin.'

Her blue eyes are soft and gentle.

'Naddalin, it's nice to see you again. Billie envelops me in a warm embrace. 'Come in, my Dear,

'Is she here?' I hear a scream from inside the house. I eyed Grayson nervously.

'It would be Mia, my little sister, ' he said almost irritated, but not quite.

There is a flurry of affection in his words, the way his voice becomes softer and his eyes narrow when he mentions her name. Grayson adores him. It's a revelation.

And she rushes down the hall, raven-haired, tall, and curvaceous. She's about my age.

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'Naddalin! I've heard so much about you. She hugs me tightly.

Holy Cow. I can't help but smile at his boundless enthusiasm.

'Naddalin, please,' I whisper as she leads me into the large hallway. These are all dark wood floors and antique rugs with a sweeping staircase leading to the second floor.

'He's never brought a girl home,' Mia said, dark eyes shining with excitement.

I see Grayson rolling his eyes and raising an eyebrow at him. He narrows his eyes at me.

'Mia, calm down,' Billie warns softly. 'Hello, honey,' she said, kissing Grayson on both cheeks. He smiles warmly at her, then shakes his father's hand.

We all turn and walk towards the living room. Mia didn't let go of my hand. The bedroom is spacious, tastefully furnished in cream, brown and pale blue tones, comfortable, understated, and very elegant. Maury and Jack are cuddling together on a sofa, hugging champagne flutes. Maury bounces back to kiss me, and Mia finally lets go of my hand.

'Hi, Naddalin!' She is beaming. 'Grayson. She nods her head sharply.

'Maury. He's just as formal with her.

I frown at their exchange. Jack grabs me in a global embrace. What is it, embrace Naddalin's week? Grayson stands beside me, wrapping his arm around me. Putting his hand on my hip, he extends his fingers and pulls me closer. Everyone is watching us. It is disconcerting.

'Drinks? Mr. Maury appears to have recovered. 'Prosecco?

'Please,' Grayson and I speak in unison.

Oh... this is more than weird. Mia claps her hands.

'You even say the same things. I'll get them.' She walks out of the room.

I blush scarlet and seeing Maury sitting with Jack, it suddenly occurs to me that the only reason Grayson has invited me is that Maury is there. Jack probably freely and happily asked Maury to meet his parents. Grayson was trapped - knowing I would have found out via Maury. I frown at

the thought. He was coerced into the invitation. The realization is dark and depressing. My subconscious nods quietly, a look you've finally worked on his face.

'Dinner's almost ready,' Billie said, following Mia out of the room.

Grayson frowns at me.

'Sit down,' he orders, pointing to the plush sofa, and I do as I'm told, carefully crossing my legs. He sits next to me but doesn't touch me.

'We were just talking about vacations, Naddalin,' Mr. Maury said gently. 'Jack decided to follow Maury and his family to Barbados for a week.'

I glance at Maury, and she smiles, her eyes bright and wide. She is happy. Mary Smith, show your dignity!

'Are you taking a break now that you've finished your degree?' Mr. Maury asks.

'I am thinking of going to Georgia for a few days,' I replied.

Grayson looks at me, blinking several times, his expression was unreadable. Oh shit.

I didn't tell him about it.

'Georgia?' He whispers.

'My mother lives there, and I haven't seen her for a while.

'When were you thinking of going?' Her voice is low.

'Tomorrow, late at night.

Mia walks into the living room and hands us champagne flutes filled with pale pink Prosecco.

'Your good health!' Mr. Maury raises his glass. A proper toast from a doctor's husband makes me smile.

'For how long?' Grayson asks, his voice deceptively soft.

Holy shit... he's angry.

'I don't know yet. It will depend on how my interviews go tomorrow.'

His jaw tightens and Maury gets that interfering look on his face. She smiles too sweetly.

'Naddalin deserves a break,' she said pointedly to Grayson. Why is she so antagonistic to him? What's his problem?

'Do you have any interviews?' Mr. Maury asks.

'Yes, for internships with two publishers tomorrow.'

'I wish you good luck.'

'Dinner is on the table,' Billie announces.

We are all standing. Maury and Jack follow Mr. Maury and Mia out of the room. I'll follow him, but Grayson squeezes my elbow, stopping abruptly.

'When are you going to tell me you're leaving?' he asks urgently. His tone is gentle, but he hides his anger.

'I'm not leaving, I'm going to see my mother, and I was just thinking about it.'

'What about our arrangement?'

'We don't have an arrangement yet.'

He narrows his eyes, then seems to remember himself. Releasing my hand, he takes my elbow and leads me out of the room.

'This conversation is not over,' he mutters threateningly as we enter the dining room.

Oh, crapola. Don't put your panties in such a twist... and give me back mine. I stare at him.

The dining room reminds me of our private dinner at the Heathman. A crystal chandelier hangs above the dark wood table and there is a massive, richly carved mirror on the wall. The table is set and covered with a crisp white linen tablecloth, a bowl of pale pink peonies as the centerpiece. That's wonderful.

We take our places. Mr. Maury is at the head of the table, while I sit to his right, and Grayson is seated next to me. Mr. Maury takes the opened bottle of red wine and offers it to Maury. Mia takes a seat next to Grayson, and grabs his hand,

squeezes it tightly. Grayson smiled warmly at him.

'Where did you meet, Naddalin?' Mia asks him.

'She interviewed me for the OVHS student magazine.'

'What Maury is changing,' I add, hoping to take the conversation away from me.

Mia beams at Maury, sitting opposite Jack, and they start talking about the student magazine.

'Wine, Naddalin?' Mr. Maury asks.

'Please.' I smile at him. Mr. Maury gets up to fill the rest of the glasses.

I glance at Grayson, and he turns to look at me, his head tilted to the side.

'What?' He asks.

'Please don't be mad at me,' I whisper.

'I'm not mad at you.'

I am watching him. He sighs.

'Yes, I am angry with you.' He briefly closes his eyes.

'Crazy palm-thrill?' I ask nervously.

'What are you both whispering about?' Maury intervenes.

I blush, and Grayson stares at her from a Smith's kind of butt - even Maury fades under his gaze.

'About my trip to Georgia,' I said quietly, hoping to dispel their mutual hostility.

Maury smiled, a nasty glint in his eyes.

'How was Sam when you went to the bar with him on Friday?'

Holy shit, Maury. I widen my eyes on her. What is she doing? Her eyes widen at me and I realize she's trying to make Grayson jealous. How little she knows. I thought I would get away with this.

'He was fine,' I whisper.

Grayson leans in.

'Crazy palm-thrill,' he whispers. 'Especially now.' His tone is calm and deadly.

Oh no. I squirm.

Billie reappears carrying two plates, followed by a pretty young woman with blond braids, elegantly dressed in pale blue, carrying a tray of plates. His eyes immediately find Grayson in the room. She blushes and looks at him under her long mascara lashes.

What!

Somewhere in the house, the phone starts ringing.

'Excuse me,' Mr. Maury stands up again and leaves.

'Thanks, Gretchen,' Billie said softly, frowning as Mr. Maury stepped out. 'Just leave the tray on the console.' Gretchen nods, and with another furtive glance at Grayson, she leaves.

So the Maury's are staffed, and the staff is eyeing my dominant potential. Can tonight get worse? I frown on my hands on my knees.

Mr. Maury is coming back.

'Call for you, honey. This is the hospital,' he told Billie.

'Please start, everyone.' Billie smiles as she hands me a plate and leaves.

It smells delicious - chorizo and scallops with roasted red peppers and shallots, sprinkled with flat-leaf parsley. And despite my stomach spinning from Grayson's veiled threats, the sneaky looks of cute little Miss Pigtails, and the mess of my missing underwear, I'm starving. I blush when I realize that it was the physical effort of this afternoon that gave me such an appetite.

Moments later, Billie returns, her brow furrowed. Mr. Maury tilts his head to one side... I love Grayson. 'Everything is fine?' 'Another case of measles,' Billie sighs. 'Oh no.' 'Yes, a child. The fourth case this month. If only people could get their children immunized.' She shakes her head sadly, then smiles. 'I'm so glad our kids have never experienced this. They've never caught anything worse than chicken pox, thank goodness. Poor Jack, 'she said as she sat down, smiling indulgently at her son. Jack frowns and squirms uncomfortably.

'Grayson and Mia were lucky. They had it so nicely, only a place to share between them.' Mia laughs and Grayson rolls his eyes. 'So, did you catch the Mariners game, daddy?' Jack is keen to move the conversation forward. The appetizers are delicious and I focus on the meals while Jack, Mr. Maury, and Grayson talk about baseball. Grayson appears relaxed and calm as he talks to his family.

My mind is working furiously. Damn Maury, what game is she playing, is he going to punish me, I curse at the thought. I have not yet signed this contract. Maybe I won't. Maybe I'll stay in Georgia where he can't reach me. 'How are you settling into your new apartment my Dear,?' Billie asks politely. I'm grateful for his question, which distracts me from my discordant thoughts, and I tell him about our move. As we finish our entries, Gretchen appears, and not for the first time, I wish I could have freely put my hands on Grayson just to let him know - he has maybe numerous Shadows of screwed up, but he is. to me. She proceeds to clear the table, rubbing a little too close to Grayson for my liking. Fortunately, he seems oblivious to her, but my inner

goddess is on fire and not in a good way. Maury and Mia are lyrical about Paris.

'Have you been to Paris, Naddalin?' Mia innocently asks, distracting me from my jealous reverie. 'No, but I would love to go.' I know I am the only one at the table who has never left the continental United States. 'We spent our honeymoon in Paris.' Billie smiled at Mr. Maury who smiled back at her.

It's almost embarrassing to be a witness. They love each other deeply, and I wonder for a moment what it must be like to grow up with both parents in situ. 'It's a beautiful city,' Mia admits. 'Despite the Parisians. Grayson, you should take Naddalin to Paris,' Mia says firmly. 'I think Naddalin would prefer London,' Grayson said softly. Oh... he remembered. He puts his hand on my knee - his fingers move up to my thigh. My whole body tightens in response. No... not here, not now. I blush and move, trying to get away from him. His hand tightens on my thigh, immobilizing me.

I am looking for my wine, in desperation. Little Miss European Pigtails returns, all shy looks and swaying hips, with our in-tree, a Beef Wellington, I

believe. Fortunately, she gives us our plates and then leaves, although she lingers to hand here's to Grayson. He looks at me questioningly as I watch her close the dining-room door. 'So what was wrong with the Parisians?' Jack asks his sister. 'Haven't they adopted your attractive ways?' 'Ugh, no they didn't. And Mr. Floubert, the ogre I worked for, was such a bossy tyrant.' I stammer in my wine.

'Naddalin, are you okay?' Grayson asks solicitously, removing his hand from my thigh. The humor returned to his voice. Oh, thank you, my God. When I nod, he gently pats me on the back and doesn't remove his hand until he knows I've recovered. The beef is delicious and served with roasted sweet potatoes, carrots, parsnips, and green beans. It's even more palatable since Grayson I get it done to keep his mood up for the rest of the meal. I suspect it's because I eat so well. Conversation flows freely among the warm and caring Maury’s, gently teasing each other. During our lemon syllabub dessert, Mia regales us with her exploits in Paris, falling at one point in fluent French. We all stare at her, and she looks at him puzzled until Grayson tells her in equally fluent

French what she did, whereupon she bursts into a burst of laughter.

She has a very infectious laugh and soon we are all in the stitches. Jack talks about his latest construction project, a new green community in upstate New York. I look at Maury, and she clings to every word Jack says, her eyes shining with desire or love. I haven't quite figured out which one yet. He smiles at her and it is as if an unspoken promise is passing between them. see yeah, baby, he says, and it's hot, creepy. I blush just looking at them. I sigh and glance at numerous Shadows. He is so beautiful, I could watch him forever. He has a slight stubble on his chin, and my fingers itch to scratch it and feel it against my face, against my breasts… between my thighs. I blush in the sense of my thoughts. He looks at me and raises his hand to pull on my chin. 'Don't bite your lip,' he whispers hoarsely.

'I want to do that.' Billie and Mia clear our dessert glasses and head to the kitchen, while Mr. Maury, Maury, and Jack discuss the merits of solar panels in Washington state. Grayson, pretending to be interested in their conversation, rests his hand on my knee again and his fingers

move up to my thigh. My breathing stops and I press my thighs together in an attempt to stop its progress. I can see him smirking. 'Shall I show you around the estate?' he asks me quite openly. I know I'm supposed to say yes, but I don't trust him. Before I can answer though, he's standing and holding out his hand to me.

I place my hand in his and feel all the muscles tighten deep in my stomach, responding to his dark, hungry gray gaze. 'Excuse me,' I say to Mr. Maury, and am Grayson out of the dining room. He leads me through the hallway and into the kitchen where Mia and Billie are stacking the dishwasher. European braids are nowhere to be found. 'I'm going to show Naddalin the backyard,' Grayson said innocently to his mother. She waves to us with a smile as Mia returns to the dining room. We step out onto a Murray slab patio lit by lights embedded in the slabs. There are shrubs in the Murray Stone tubs and a chic metal table and chairs set in a corner. Grayson walks past these, climbs a few steps, and onto a wide lawn that leads to the bay... oh my - it's beautiful.

New York City sparkles on the horizon, and the cool, bright May Moon

traces a sparkling silver path across the water to a jetty where two boats are moored. Next to the pier is a boathouse. It's so picturesque, so peaceful. I stood there speechless for a while. Grayson pulls me behind him and my heels dig into the soft grass. 'Stop Please.' I stumble in its wake. He stops and looks at me, his expression unfathomable. 'My heels. I have to take off my shoes.' 'Don't bother,' he says, and leans in and takes me over his shoulder. I cry out in shocked surprise, and he gives me a hissing slap on my butt. 'Keep your voice low,' he growls. Oh no... that's not good, my subconscious is shaking at the knees. He's crazy about something - could be Sam, Georgia, no panties, biting my lip.

Damn, he's easy to piss off. 'Where are we going?' I breathe. 'Boathouse,' he snaps. I cling to his hips as I'm knocked back, and he deliberately walks in the moonlight across the lawn. 'Why?' I look breathless, bouncing off that shoulder. 'I need to be alone with you.' 'Why?' 'Because I'm going to spank you and then fuck you.' 'Why?' I moan softly. 'You know why,' he hisses. 'I thought you were a guy of the moment?' I beg breathlessly. 'Naddalin, I'm in the moment, trust me.' Holy shit.

Grayson bursts in through the wooden door to the boathouse and stops to turn on some lights. Fluorescent lights flash and buzz in sequence as a harsh white light floods the large wooden building. From my upside-down view, I can see an impressive motorized launch pad in the dock floating gently over the dark water, but I only get a brief glimpse before it whiskers me up the stairs. wood to the room above.

He stops at the door and touches another switch - halogens this time, they're softer, on a dimmer - and we're in an attic room with sloping ceilings. It's decorated with a New England nautical theme: navy blue and cream with a touch of red. The furniture is sparse, just a few sofas are all I can see.

Grayson sets me down on the floor. I don't have time to examine my surroundings - my eyes can't take my eyes off it. I'm fascinated... watching it as one would observe a rare and dangerous predator, waiting for it to strike. His breathing is hard, but he just carried me across the lawn and up a staircase. Gray eyes shine with anger, need, and pure lust.

Holy shit fuck. I could spontaneously burn from his gaze alone.

'Please don't hit me,' I whisper pleadingly.

His brow furrows, his eyes widen. He blinks twice.

'I don't want you to spank me here or now.' Please don't.

Her mouth opens slightly in surprise, and beyond courage, I reach out and run my fingers down her cheek, along the edge of her paws, to the stubble on her chin.

It is a curious mixture of sweet and spicy. Slowly closing his eyes, he leans his face against my touch, and his breath hangs in his throat. Reaching out with my other hand, I run my fingers through her hair. I love her hair. His soft moan is barely audible, and when he opens his eyes his gaze is - suspicious as if he doesn't understand what I'm doing.

Stepping forward so I'm against him, I pull gently on his hair, bringing his mouth to mine, and kiss him, forcing my tongue between his lips and into his mouth. He moans and his arms kiss me, pulling me towards him. His hands work their way through my hair and he kisses me back,

hard and possessive. Her tongue and my tongue twist and turn together, devouring each other. It tastes divine.

He abruptly pulls back, our collective breathing torn and mingled. My hands fall on his arms and he looks at me.

'What are you doing to me?' he whispers confused.

'Kiss you.'

'You said no.'

'What?' No to what?

'At the table, with your legs.'

Oh... that's what it is.

'But we were at your parents' dining table.' I look at him, completely puzzled.

'No one has ever said no to me before. And it's so hot.

Her eyes widen slightly, filled with wonder and desire. It's an intoxicating mixture. I instinctively swallow. His hand goes down to my behind. He pulls me sharply against him, and I can feel his erection.

Oh my...

'Are you crazy and excited because I said no?' I breathe, amazed.

'I'm angry because you never mentioned Georgia to me.' I'm angry because you went drinking with this guy who tried to seduce you when you were drunk and who left you when you were sick with an almost stranger. What kind of friend does that And I'm crazy and excited because you closed my legs. 'His eyes shine dangerously and he slowly pulls up the hem of my dress.

'I want you, and I want you now. And if you don't let me spank you - which you deserve - I'm going to fuck you on the couch this minute, quickly, for my pleasure, not yours. '

My dress barely covers my bare bottom. He suddenly moves so that his hand cupped my cock, and one of his fingers slowly digs into me. His other arm holds me firmly in place around my waist. I suppress my moan.

'It's mine,' he mutters aggressively. 'All mine. Do you understand?' He puts his

finger in and out while looking at me, measuring my reaction, his eyes burning.

'Yes, yours,' I breathe as my lust, hot and heavy, rises through my bloodstream, affecting… everything. My nerve endings, my breathing, my heart pounding, trying to leave my chest, the blood swirling in my ears.

-Then-

Suddenly he moves, doing several things at once. Withdrawing his fingers, letting me want, opening his fly, and pushing me onto the couch so that he lies on top of me.

'Hands on my head,' he orders through clenched teeth as he kneels, forcing my legs to widen and reaching for the inside pocket of his jacket. He pulls out a package of foil, looking at me, his expression dark, before removing his jacket so that it falls to the floor. He rolls the condom over its impressive length.

I place my hands on my head and I know it's so as not to touch it. I am so excited.

I can feel my hips already moving to meet him - wanting him in me, like that - rough and hard. Oh... the anticipation.

'We don't have long. It will be quick, and it's for me, not for you. Do you understand?

Don't come, or I'll spank you, 'he said, gritting his teeth.

Holy shit... how can I stop?

Suddenly he's completely inside of me. I moan loudly, throatily, and revel in the fullness of his possession. He puts his hands on mine above my head, his elbows support my arms outward and down, and his legs prick me. I am trapped. It is everywhere, overwhelms me, almost suffocates. But it's also heavenly, it's my power, it's what I do to it, and it's a hedonistic and triumphant feeling. He is moving fast and furiously inside me, his breathing rough in my ear, and my body reacts, melting around him. I must not come. No, But I meet it push for push, a perfect counterpoint. Abruptly, and too soon, he sinks into me and comes to a stop when he finds his release, the air hissing between his teeth.

He relaxes momentarily, so I can feel him whole, a delicious weight on me. I am not ready to let him go, my body thirsts for relief, but it is so heavy, and at this point, I can not push it against it. suddenly it pulls out, leaving me sore and hungry for more. He looks at me.

'Don't touch yourself. I want you to be frustrated. That's what you do to me by not talking to me, denying me what's mine.' His eyes shine again, angry.

I nod, panting. He gets up and removes the condom, knots it at the end, and puts it in his pants pocket. I watch him, my breathing still irregular, and involuntarily squeeze my thighs together, trying to find some relief. Grayson lifts his fly and runs a hand through his hair as he bends down to retrieve his jacket. He turns to look at me, his expression was softer.

'We better get home.'

I sit down, a little unsteady, dizzy.

'Here. You can put them.'

From his inside pocket, he takes out my panties. I don't smile as I take them from him, but inside I know - I took the punishment, but I won a small victory over

the panties. My inner goddess nods in agreement, a satisfied smile on her face - you didn't have to ask for them.

'Grayson! Mia screams from the ground below.

He turns and raises his eyebrows at me.

'Right on time. Lord, she can be really irritating.'

I knock her eyebrows back, hastily put my panties back in their proper place, and hold myself with as much dignity as I can muster in my just fucked state. Quickly, I try to straighten my just kissed hair.

'Up there, Mia,' he calls. 'Well, Miss Black, I feel better about it - but I still want to spank you,' he said softly.

'I don't think I deserve it, Mr. Maury, especially after tolerating your unprovoked attack.'

'Without provocation, you kissed me.' He does his best to look hurt.

I tighten my lips.

'He was attacked as the best form of defense.'

'Defense against what?'

'You and your trembling palm.'

He tilts his head to the side and smiles at me as Mia walks up the stairs.

'But was it tolerable?' he asks softly.

I rinse.

'Barely,' I whisper, but I can't help but smile.

'Oh, there you are.' She shines on us.

'I was showing Naddalin.' Grayson holds out his hand to me, his gray eyes intense.

I put my hand in his and he squeezes it gently.

'Maury and Jack are about to leave. Can you believe these two can't hold hands? Mia feigns disgust and looks at me from Grayson. 'What have you been doing here?'

Damn, she's forward. I blush scarlet.

'Showing Naddalin my rowing trophies,' Grayson said without missing a beat, completely turned to poker. 'Let's go say goodbye to Maury and Jack.'

Rowing trophies He pulls me gently in front of him, and as Mia turns around he hits me on the butt. I gasp in surprise.

'I'll do it again, Naddalin, and soon,' he threatens quietly near my ear, then hugs me, my back against him, and kisses my hair.

Back home, Maury and Jack bid farewell to Billie and Mr. Maury. Maury hugs me tightly.

'I need to tell you about Grayson's annoyance,' I hiss softly in her ear as she kisses me.

'He needs to be upset, so you can see what he really looks like. Be careful, Naddalin - he's in control so much,' she whispered. 'See you later.'

I KNOW WHAT IT HAS - YOU DON'T! - I'm yelling at him in my head.

I am fully aware that her actions are coming from a good place, but

sometimes she just goes off target, and right now she is neighboring. I scowl at her and she sticks her tongue out at me, making me smile reluctantly. Playful Maury is new and must be Jack's influence. We wave to them at the door and Grayson turns to me.

'We should go too - you have interviews tomorrow.'

Mia hugs me warmly as we say goodbye.

'We never thought he would find someone!' it gushes out.

I blush and Grayson rolls his eyes again. I tighten my lips. Why can he do this when I can't? I want to roll my eyes on him, but I dare not, not after his threat in the boathouse.

'Take care of yourself, Naddalin, honey,' Billie said gently

Grayson, embarrassed or frustrated at the generous attention I receive from the remaining Maury’s, grabs my hand and pulls me to his side.

'Don't frighten her or spoil her with too much affection,' he growls.

'Grayson, stop teasing.' Billie scolds him indulgently, her eyes shining with love and affection for him.

Somehow, I don't think he's teasing. I surreptitiously watch their interaction. Billie adores her with the unconditional love of a mother. He leans in and kisses her stiffly.

'Mom,' he says, and there's an undercurrent in his voice - reverence maybe?

'Mr. Maury - bye and thank you.' I reach out to him, and he hugs me too!

'Please call me Carrick. I hope we will see you again very soon, Naddalin.'

Our farewells have been said, Grayson drives me to the car where Stephen is waiting. Did he wait here the whole time for Stephen to open my door, and I slipped into the back of the Audi.

I feel some of the tension leaving my shoulders. What a fucking day. I am exhausted, physically and emotionally. After a brief conversation with Stephen, Grayson climbs into the car next to me. He turns to face me.

'Well it seems my family loves you too,' he whispers.

The depressing thought of how I came to be invited spontaneously arises and is very intrusive in my head. Stephen starts the car and walks away from the circle of light in the driveway towards the darkness of the road. I look at Grayson and he looks at me.

'What?' he asks, his voice calm.

I flounder momentarily. No, I'll tell him. He always complains that I don't talk to him.

'I think you felt trapped in leading me to meet your parents.' My voice is soft and hesitant. 'If Jack hadn't asked Maury, you never would have asked me.' I can't see his face in the dark, but he tilts his head open-mouthed at me.

'Naddalin, I'm glad you met my parents. Why are you so full of doubt? It never ceases to amaze me. You are such a strong and empowered young woman, but you have such negative thoughts about If I hadn't wanted you to meet them, you wouldn't be here. Is that how you felt the whole time you were there? '

Oh! He wanted me there - and that's a revelation. He doesn't seem uncomfortable answering me like he would if he was hiding the truth. He seems happy that I'm here... a warm glow slowly spreads through my veins. He shakes his head and takes my hand. I look nervously at Stephen.

'Don't worry about Stephen. Talk to me.'

I shrug my shoulders.

'Yes. I was thinking that. And another thing, I only mentioned Georgia because Maury was talking about Barbados - I didn't make up my mind.'

'Do you want to go see your mother?'

'Yes.'

He looks at me oddly, like he's having an internal struggle.

'Can I come with you?' he asks finally.

What!?

'Uh... I don't think that's a good idea.'

'Why not?'

'I was hoping to take a break from it all… intensity to try to think.'

He looks at me.

'Am I too intense?'

I laughed.

'It's the least we can say!'

In the light of the passing streetlights, I see her lips rise.

'Are you kidding me, Miss Black?'

'I wouldn't dare, Mr. Maury,' I reply with serious mockery.

'I think you dare, and I think you laugh at me, often.'

'You are quite funny.'

'Funny?'

'Oh yes.'

'funny, strange or funny ha ha?'

'Oh... a lot of both.'

'In which way?'

'I leave it to you to understand that.'

'I don't know if I can find anything around you, Naddalin,' he said Naddalindonically, then continued quietly, 'What do you need to think about in Georgia?'

'Us,' I whisper.

He looks at me, impassive.

'You said you would try,' he whispers.

'I know.'

'Do you have any doubts?'

'Perhaps.'

He moves as if he is uncomfortable.

'Why?'

Holy shit. How did it suddenly become such an intense and meaningful conversation? It happened to me, like an exam for which I am not prepared. What do I say? Because I think I love you and you see me as a toy. Because I can't touch you, because I'm too scared to show you

affection in case you flinch or denigrate me or worse - beat me What can I say?

I look out the window momentarily. The car returns to the bridge. We are both shrouded in darkness, hiding our thoughts and feelings, but we don't need the night for that.

'Why, Naddalin? Grayson urges me for an answer.

I shrug my shoulders, trapped. I don't want to lose it. Despite all its demands, its need for control, its frightening vices. I have never felt so alive as now. It's a pleasure to be sitting here next to him. He's so unpredictable, sexy, smart, and funny. But his moods... oh - and he wants to hurt me. He says he'll think about my reservations, but it still scares me. I close my eyes. What can I say: Deep down, I just want more, more affection, more playful Grayson, more... love.

He shakes my hand.

'Talk to me, Naddalin. I don't want to lose you. Last week...' He pauses.

We are approaching the end of the bridge, and the road is again bathed in the neon light from the streetlamps, so his face

is intermittently in light and dark. And that's such a fitting metaphor. This man, whom I once considered a romantic hero - a brave shining white knight, or the dark knight as he put it. He's not a hero, he's a man with serious and deep emotional flaws, and he's dragging me into the dark. Can't I guide him into the light?

'I want more,' I whisper.

'I know,' he said. 'I'll try.'

I blink at him, and he lets go of my hand and pulls on my chin, freeing my trapped lip.

'For you, Naddalin, I'll try.' He radiates sincerity.

And that's my signal. I unbuckle my belt, reach out and climb onto his knees, taking him completely by surprise. Wrapping my arms around his head, I kiss him, long and hard, and in a nanosecond, he responds.

'Stay with me tonight,' he hisses. 'If you go, I won't see you all week. Please.'

'Yes, I accept. 'And I'll try too. I'll sign your contract.' And it's an impulsive decision of the moment.

He looks at me.

'Sign after Georgia. Think about it. Think about it, baby.'

'I go.' And we sit in silence for a mile or two.

'You should really be wearing your seatbelt,' Grayson whispers disapprovingly through my hair, but he does not move to move me off his knees.

I snuggled up to him, eyes closed, nose to his throat, sipping his sexy Grayson-and-spicy-musky shower gel scent, my head on his shoulder. I let my mind drift and allow myself to fantasize that he loves me. Oh, and it's so real, almost tangible, and a small part of my embarrassing evil harpy is acting completely out of character and daring to hope. I'm careful not to touch his chest but to snuggle into his arms as he holds me tight.

Too soon, I am torn from my impossible daydream.

'We're home,' Grayson whispers, and it's such a tantalizing phrase, full of so much potential.

At home, with Grayson. Except that his apartment is an art gallery, not a house.

Stephen opens the door for us, and I thank him shyly, aware that he has been within earshot of our conversation, but his gentle smile is reassuring and reveals nothing. After getting out of the car, Grayson takes a critical look at me. Oh no... what have I done now?

'Why don't you have a jacket? he frowns, shrugging his shoulders and draping it over my shoulders.

Relief swept over me.

'It's in my new car,' I replied sleepily, yawning.

He gives me a smirk.

'Tired, Miss Black?

'Yes, Mr. Maury. I feel shy under his mocking examination. Nonetheless, I think exploration is in order, 'I was convinced in a way that I never thought possible today.'

'Well, if you're really unlucky, maybe I could win some more,' he

promises, taking my hand and leading me into the building. Holy shit... Again?

I watch him in the elevator. I assumed he would like me to sleep with him, then I remember that he doesn't sleep with anyone, although he has him with me a few times.

I frown and suddenly his gaze darkens. He reaches out and grabs my chin, freeing my lip from the teeth.

'Someday- I'm going to fuck you in that elevator, Naddalin, but right now you're tired - so I think we should stick to a bed.'

Leaning down, he clenches his teeth around my lower lip and pulls gently. I melt against him and my breathing stops as my insides unfurl with envy. I reciprocate, clip my teeth to his upper lip, tease him and he moans. When the elevator doors open, he grabs my hand and pulls me into the lobby, through the double doors, and down the hall.

'Do you need a drink or anything?'

'No.'

'Good. Let's go to bed.'

I raise my eyebrows at him.

'Are you going to settle for plain old vanilla?'

He tilts his head to one side.

'Nothing simple or old about vanilla - it's a very intriguing flavor,' he hisses.

'Since when?'

'Since, last Saturday. Why were you hoping for something more exotic?'

My inner goddess makes her head appear above the parapet.

'Oh no. I had enough exoticism for a day.' My inner goddess pouted at me, failing miserably to hide her disappointment.

'Of course, we cater for all tastes here - at least thirty-one flavors.' He smiles at me lasciviously.

'I noticed,' I replied dryly.

He shakes his head.

'Come on, Miss Black, you have a great day tomorrow. The sooner you are in

bed, the sooner you will be fucked, and the sooner you can sleep.

'Mr. Maury, you are a born romantic.'

'Miss Black, you have a smart mouth. I may have to master it somehow. Come on.' He leads me down the hall to his bedroom and closes the door.

'Hands up,' he orders.

I oblige, and in a movement breathtakingly quick, he removes my robe like a magician, grabbing it by the hem and pulling it gently and quickly over my head.

'Ta-Da! he said playfully.

I laugh and applaud politely. He bows Billie fully, smiling. How can I resist him when he's like this? He puts my dress on the lonely chair next to his dresser.

'What about your next turn?' I invite him, teasing.

'Oh my Dear, Miss Black. Get in my bed,' he growled. 'And I'll show you.'

'Do you think for once- I would have to play hard to get it?' I ask coquettishly.

Her eyes widen in surprise and I see a flicker of excitement.

'Well… the door is closed. I don't know how you're going to avoid me,' he said Naddalindonically. 'I think it's a done deal.'

'But I am a good negotiator.'

'So, I am.' He looks at me, but as he does, his expression changes, confusion invades him and the atmosphere in the room abruptly changes, tensing. 'Don't you want to fuck?' he asks.

'No,' I breathe.

'Oh.' He frowns.

Okay, there you go... deep breathing.

'I want you to make love to me.'

He stops and looks at me blankly. His expression darkens. Oh shit, that doesn't look good. Give it a minute! My subconscious slams.

'Naddalin, I…' He runs his hands through her hair. Two hands. Jeez, he's baffled.

'I thought we did it?' He said finally.

'I want to touch you.'

He involuntarily pulls back from me, his expression scared for a moment, then he makes her reign.

'Please,' I whisper.

He recovers himself.

'Oh, no Miss Black, you've had enough concessions from me tonight. And I'm saying no.'

'No?'

'No.'

Oh... I can't argue with this... can I?

'Look, you're tired, I'm tired. Let's go to bed,' he said looking at me intently.

'So, is touching a difficult limit for you?'

'Yes. This is old news.'

'Please tell me why.'

'Oh, Naddalin, please. Just leave him for now,' he mumbles exasperatedly.

'It's important to me.'

Again, he runs both hands through his hair and takes an oath through his beard.

Turning on his heels, he walks over to the dresser, pulls out a t-shirt, and throws it at me. I grab it, puzzled.

'Put that on and go to bed,' he snaps irritably.

I frown but decide to please him. Turning my back, I quickly remove my bra, pulling on the t-shirt as quickly as possible to cover my nakedness. I leave my panties on, I haven't worn them most of the evening.

'I need the bathroom.' My voice is a whisper.

He frowns, puzzled.

'Now are you asking for permission?'

'Uh no.'

'Naddalin, you know where the bathroom is. Today, at this point in our strange arrangement, you don't need my permission to use it. He cannot hide his irritation. He shrugs his shirt off and I rush into the bathroom.

I look at myself in the very large mirror, shocked to still see the same thing. After everything I've done today, it's still the same regular girl looking at me. What did you expect - that you would grow horns and a little pointy tail? My subconscious slams me down. And what are you doing? Touching is its hard limit. Too soon, silly, he needs to walk before he can run. My subconscious is furious, like a jellyfish in its anger, hair flying, its hands clasped around his face like Edvard Munch's cry. I don't know, but it won't go back into its box. You drive him crazy - think about everything he said, everything he conceded. I frown at my reflection. I need to be able to show him affection - so maybe he can return the favor.

I shake my resigned head and grab Grayson's toothbrush. My subconscious is of course right. I rushed him. He's not ready and neither am I. We are balanced on the delicate swing, this is our odd

arrangement - for different purposes, hesitant, and it rocks and swings between us. We both need to get closer to the middle. I just hope none of us fall for our attempt to do so. It's all so fast. Maybe I need some distance. Georgia looks more attractive than ever. As I start to brush my teeth, he knocks.

'Come in,' I stammer through a sip of toothpaste.

Grayson stands in the doorway, his pajamas hanging from his hips - this way every little cell in my body rises and takes note. He's shirtless, and I drink him like I'm crazed with thirst and clear, fresh mountain spring water. He looks at me impassively, then smiles and comes to stand next to me. Our eyes lock in the mirror, from gray to blue. I finish with his toothbrush, rinse it and hand it to him, my gaze never leaving hers. Without a word, he takes the toothbrush from me and puts it in his mouth. I smirk back at him, and his eyes suddenly dance with humor.

'Don't hesitate to borrow my toothbrush.' His tone is softly mocking.

'Thank you, sir,' I smile gently and leave, going back to bed.

A few minutes later, he joins me.

'You know that's not how I saw it panning tonight,' he mumbles excitedly.

'Imagine if I told you that you couldn't touch me.'

He climbs onto the bed and sits cross-legged.

'Naddalin, I told you. numerous Shadows. I had a rough start in life - you don't want that shit in your head. Why would you do it?'

'Because, I want to know you better.'

'You know me pretty well.'

'How can you say that?' I fight on my knees, facing him.

He rolls his eyes at me, frustrated.

'You roll your eyes. The last time I did this I ended up on your knee.'

'Oh, I would like to get you back to it.'

Inspiration hits me.

'Tell me and you can.'

'What?'

'You hear me.'

'Are you negotiating with me?' Her voice echoes with astonished disbelief.

I agree. Yes... this is the way.

'To negotiate.'

'It doesn't work that way, Naddalin.'

'Okay. Tell me, and I'll roll my eyes at you.'

He laughs, and I have a rare glimpse of carefree Grayson. I haven't seen him for a while.

He's sober.

'Always so eager and hungry for information.' His gray eyes glow with speculation.

After a while, he gets off Billie's bed Billie fully. 'Don't go,' he said as he left the room.

Trepidation runs through me and I hug myself. What is he doing, does he have

an evil plan Suppose he comes back with a cane or some weird object?

What the fuck, am I gonna do then? When he comes back he is holding something small in his hands. I don't see what it is and I'm burning with curiosity.

'When is your first interview tomorrow?' He asks softly.

'Of them.'

A slow, mean smile spreads over his face.

'Good.' And before my eyes, it subtly changes. He is harder, more intractable... hot. It's Dominant Grayson.

'Get off the bed. Stand here.' He points to the bed, and I go up and down in double time. He stares at me, his eyes shining with promise.

'Believe me?' He asks softly.

I agree. He stretches out his hand and in his palm are two round, shiny, silver balls, linked by a thick black thread.

'These are new things,' he says categorically.

I look at him questioningly.

'I'm going to put this in you, and then I'm going to spank you, not to punish you, but for your pleasure and mine.' He pauses, measuring my wide-eyed reaction.

Inside me! I gasp, and all the muscles in my stomach tighten. My inner goddess is dancing with the seven veils.

'So we're gonna fuck, and if you're still awake I'll give you some info on my formative years. Okay?'

He's asking for my permission! Out of breath, I nod. I am unable to speak.

'Good girl. Open your mouth.'

Mouth?

'Wider.'

Very gently, he puts his balls in my mouth.

'They need lubrication. Suck,' he orders, his voice soft.

The balls are cold, smooth, surprisingly heavy, and with a metallic taste. My dry mouth filled with saliva as my tongue explored unknown objects.

Grayson's gray gaze never leaves mine. Damn, that turns me on. I squirm slightly.

'Be still, Naddalin,' he warns.

'Stop.' He pulls them out of my mouth. Walking over to the bed, he throws the quilt aside and sits on the edge.

'Come here.'

I stand in front of him.

'Now turn around, bend over and grab your ankles.'

I blink at him and his expression darkens.

'Don't hesitate,' he berates me softly, an undercurrent in his voice, and he puts his balls in his mouth.

Damn, that's sexier than the toothbrush. I follow his orders immediately. Jeez, can I touch my ankles, I find that I can, with ease. The t-shirt slides down my back, exposing my behind. Thank goodness I kept my panties on, but I guess I won't be for long.

He places his hand respectfully on my back and strokes it very gently with his whole hand. With my eyes open, I can see

his legs through mine, nothing else. I close my eyes firmly as he gently moves my panties to the side and slowly runs his finger up and down my cock. My body readies itself in an intoxicating mixture of wild anticipation and excitement. He slips a finger inside me, and he slowly surrounds it deliciously. Oh, that feels good. I moan.

His breathing stops and I hear him gasp as he repeats the movement. He withdraws his finger and very slowly inserts the objects, a slow and delicious ball at a time. Oh my.

They are at body temperature, warmed by our collective mouths. It's a curious feeling. Once they're inside of me, I can't smell them - but again, I know they're there.

He straightens my panties and leans forward, and his lips gently kiss my behind.

'Get up,' he orders, and I stand up shaking.

Oh! Now I can feel them… sort of. He grabs my hips to steady me as I restore my balance.

'It's okay?' he asks, his voice stern.

'Yes.' My answer is as soft as a feather.

'Turn around.' I turn around and face him.

The bullets shoot down and involuntarily I huddle around them. The feeling startles me but not bad.

'What does it do?' He asks.

'Strange.'

'Strange good or strange bad?'

'Very strange,' I admit, blushing.

'Good.' There is a hint of humor in his eyes.

'I want a glass of water. Go get me one please.'

Oh.

'And when you come back, I'll put you on my knee.' Think about it, Naddalin.

Water He wants water - now - why?

Leaving the room it becomes very clear why he wants me to take a walk - as I do, the balls weigh in me, massaging me inside. It is such a strange feeling and not

entirely unpleasant. My breathing quickens as I stretch for a drink in the kitchen cupboard, and gasp. Oh my... maybe I should keep them. They make me needy, in need of sex.

He watches me carefully when I return.

'Thank you,' he said, taking the glass from me.

Slowly, he takes a sip, then sets the glass down on his bedside table. There is a package of foil, ready and waiting, like me. And I know he does this to create anticipation. My heart accelerated. He turns his light gray gaze to mine.

'Come on. Stand next to me. Like last time.'

I sneak up to him, my blood swirling around my body, and this time... I'm excited.

Excited.

'Ask me,' he said softly.

I frown. Ask him what?

'Ask me,' her voice is slightly harsher.

What was your water? What does he want?

'Ask me, Naddalin. I won't repeat it.' And there is such a threat implicit in his words, and it occurs to me. He wants me to ask him to spank me.

Holy shit. He looks at me expectantly, his eyes cooling. Shit.

'Spank me, please... sir,' I whisper.

He momentarily closes his eyes, savoring my words. Reaching out, he grabs my left hand and pulls me into his lap. I fall instantly and he stabilizes me as I land on his lap.

My heart is in my mouth as his hand gently caresses me behind. I have reclined on his knees again so that my torso is resting on the bed next to him. This time he doesn't throw his leg over mine, but smoothes my hair off my face and tucks it behind my ear. Once he's done, he ties my hair at the back of my neck to hold me in place. He pulls gently and my head pulls back.

'I want to see your face as I spank you, Naddalin,' he whispered, while gently rubbing my back.

His hand goes down between the cheeks of my butt, and he pushes against my cock, and the full feeling is... I moan. Oh, the feeling is exquisite.

'It's for fun, Naddalin, mine and yours,' he whispered.

He raises his hand and lowers it with a resounding slap against the junction of my thighs, my ass, and my cock. The bullets are forced forward inside of me, and I'm lost in a quagmire of sensations. The prick in my butt, the fullness of the balls inside of me, and the fact that he was holding me back. I freak out as my faculties try to absorb all these foreign feelings. I notice somewhere in my brain that he didn't hit me as hard as the last time. He strokes my back again, running his palm over my skin and my underwear.

Why?

Why didn't he take my panties off? Then his palm disappears, and he brings it down. I moan as the sensation spreads. It starts a pattern: from left to right then down.

Stockings are the best. Everything is moving forward, inside of me... and

between each slap, he strokes me, kneads me - so I'm massaged inside and out. It's such an uplifting and erotic feeling, and for some reason, because it's on my terms, the pain doesn't bother me.

It's not painful as such - well it is, but not unbearable. It's kind of how I make it capable, and yes enjoyable... even. I moan. Yes, I can do it.

He pauses as he slowly peels my panties down my legs. I write on his legs, and not because I want to escape the blows, but I want... more, release, something. His touch against my sensitized skin is all sensual tingling. It's overwhelming, and he's starting over. A few soft slaps are then built, from left to right and below. Oh, the stockings, I moan.

'Good girl, Naddalin,' he moans, and his breathing is irregular.

He spanks me two more times, then he pulls on the little threads attached to the bullets and suddenly pulls them out of me. I'm almost at its peak - the feeling is out of this world. Moving quickly, he turns me around slowly. Instead, I see the tear in the foil bag, then he is lying next to me. He grabs my hands, hoists them above my

head, and settles on top of me, inside me, sliding slowly, filling me where the silver globes were. I moan loudly.

'Oh, baby,' he whispers, backing up, forward, a slow sultry tempo, savoring me, feeling me.

It's the sweetest it's ever been, and it doesn't take any time at all for me to fall over the edge, spiraling into a delicious, violent, and exhausting orgasm. As I hug myself around him, it ignites his release, and he creeps inside me, stilling, gasping at my name in desperate wonder.

'Naddalin!

He's silent and panting over me, his hands still entwined in mine above my head.

Finally, he leans back and looks at me.

'I enjoyed that,' he whispers, then kisses me softly.

He doesn't linger for sweeter kisses, but gets up, covers me with the duvet, and disappears into the bathroom. On his return, he carries a bottle of white lotion. He sits next to me on the bed.

'Turn around,' he orders, and reluctantly walks past me.

Honestly, this whole thing. I feel very sleepy.

'Your ass is a beautiful color,' he said approvingly, and he tenderly massages the cooling lotion into my pink bottom.

'Spill the beans, Maury,' I yawn.

'Miss Black, you know how to spoil a moment.'

'We had a deal.'

'How do you feel?'

'Short changed.'

He sighs, slips next to me, and hugs me. Be careful not to touch my spiciness behind, we are again spoonful. He kisses me very softly next to my ear.

'The woman who brought me to this world was a fucking crack, Naddalin. Sleep.'

Holy shit... what does that mean?

'Has been?'

'She is dead.'

'How long?'

He sighs.

'She died when I was four. I don't really remember her. Carrick gave me some details. I only remember some things. Please go to sleep.'

'Good night, Grayson.

'Good night,' Naddalin.

-And-

I slip into a dizzy, exhausted sleep, dreaming of a four-year-old boy with gray eyes in a dark, scary, miserable place.

There is light everywhere. Bright, warm, piercing light and I try to hold it off for a few more precious minutes. I want to hide, a few more minutes. But the glare is too strong and I finally succumb to the awakening. A beautiful New York morning greets me - the sun shines through the full height windows and floods the room with too bright light. Why don't we close the blinds last am the night in Grayson King Maury's bed minus a Grayson Maury.

I lie down for a moment, looking through the windows at the view of the

New York skyline. Life in the clouds seems unreal. A fantasy - a castle in the air, drifting off the ground, sheltered from the realities of life - away from neglect, hunger, and fucking crack mothers. I shudder to think of what he lived as a little child, and I understand why he lives here, isolated, surrounded by beautiful and precious works of art - so far from where he started... mission indeed. I frown because that still doesn't explain why I can't touch him.

Ironically, I feel the same here in its high tower. I am adrift of reality. I am in this fantastic apartment, have fantastic sex with my fantastic boyfriend. When the sad reality is he wants a special arrangement, although he said he would try more. This is what I need to clear between us to see if we are still at opposite ends of the swing or if we are gradually getting closer.

I climb out of bed feeling stiff, and for lack of a better term, well used. Yes, that would be all sex then. My subconscious tightens its lips in disapproval. I roll my eyes at her, acknowledging that a certain nervous palm control freak isn't in the room, and decide to ask her about the personal trainer. This is if I sign. My inner goddess looks at me in despair. Of course,

you will sign. I ignore them both, and after a quick trip to the bathroom, I go looking for Grayson.

He's not in the art gallery, but an elegant middle-aged woman is cleaning the kitchen. The sight of her stops me in my tracks. She has short blonde hair and light blue eyes; she wears a plain white fitted shirt and a navy pencil skirt. She smiles widely when she sees me.

'Hello, Miss Black. Do you want breakfast? His tone is warm but professional, and I am stunned. Who is this pretty blonde in Grayson's kitchen?

I only wear Grayson's t-shirt. I feel embarrassed and embarrassed by my lack of clothes.

'I'm afraid you will put me at a disadvantage. My voice is calm, unable to hide the anguish in my voice.

'Oh, I'm terribly sorry - I'm Mrs. Jones, Mr. Maury's housekeeper.'

Oh.

'How are you?' I do it.

'Would you like some breakfast, ma'am?'

Mrs!

'Just a little tea would be delicious, thank you. Do you know where Mr. Maury is?

'In his study.'

'Thank you.'

I rushed to the office, mortified. Why does Grayson only have pretty blondes working for him And a bad thought involuntarily occurs to me - Are they all old subs? I refuse to have this hideous idea. I shyly put my head around the door. He's on the phone, facing the window, in black pants and a white shirt. Her hair is still wet from the shower and I am completely distracted from my negative thoughts.

'Unless this company's P&L improves, I'm not interested, Ros. We don't carry dead weight... I no longer need lame excuses... Ask Marco to call me, it's shit or bust time... Yes, tell Barney that the prototype looks good, although I'm not sure about the interface... No, there's just something missing... I want to meet him this afternoon to chat...

He and his team, we can think about... Okay. Transfer me to Andrea… 'He waits, looking out the window, master of his universe, looking at the little people below from that castle in the sky.' Andrea... 'In looking up, he notices me at the door. A slow, sexy smile spread over her beautiful face, and I was left speechless as my insides melted. He is without a doubt the most handsome man on the planet, too good-looking for the little ones below, too good-looking for me.

No, my inner goddess is watching me, not too good-looking for me. He's sort of mine, for now.

The idea makes me shudder in my blood and dispels my irrational doubt.

He continues his conversation, his eyes never leaving mine.

'Clear my schedule this morning, but ask Bill to call me.' I'll be at two o'clock. I have to speak to Marco this afternoon, it will take at least half an hour... Schedule Barney and his team after Marco or maybe tomorrow, and find time for me to see Claude every day this week. Tell him to wait... Oh... No, I don't want Darfur commercials... Tell Sam to take care of it...

No... What event?... Is it next Saturday?... wait. '

'When will you be back from Georgia?' He asks.

'Friday.'

He resumes his telephone conversation.

'I will need an extra ticket because I have a date... Yes Andrea, that's what I said, a date, Miss Naddalin Black will accompany me... C 'is all.' He hangs up. 'Hello, Miss Black.

'Mr. Maury,' I smile shyly.

He walks around his desk with his usual Billie and stands in front of me. He smells so good; clean and freshly washed, so Grayson. He gently strokes my cheek with the backs of his fingers.

'I didn't want to wake you up, you looked so peaceful. Did you sleep well?'

'I am very well rested, thank you. I just came to say hello before taking a shower.'

I watch it, drink it. He leans in and kisses me softly, and I can't help myself. I

throw my arms around her neck and my fingers twist in her still-damp hair.

Pushing my body against hers, I kiss her back. I want it. My attack takes him by surprise, but after a beat, he responds, a low growl in his throat. His hands slide through my hair and down my back to take my bare butt, his tongue exploring my mouth. He pulls back, his eyes veiled.

'Well, sleep seems to be okay with you,' he whispers. 'I suggest you go take a shower, or I'll lay you down on my desk now.'

'I choose the office,' I whisper recklessly as desire sweeps like adrenaline through my system, waking everything in its path.

He looks at me puzzled for a millisecond.

'You really have a taste for it, don't you, Miss Black. You are getting insatiable,' he whispers.

'I only have one taste for you,' I whisper.

Her eyes widen and darken as her hands knead my bareback.

'Damn, only me,' he growls, and suddenly with a smooth movement, he erases all the plans and papers from his desk so that they scatter on the floor, hugs me, and lays me down. on the short end of his desk so my head is almost out of the edge.

'You want it, you have it, baby,' he mumbles, pulling a package of foil out of his pants pocket as he unzips his pants. Oh, Mr. Boy Scout. He rolls the condom over his erection and looks at me. 'I hope you're ready,' he breathes, a dirty smile on his face. And in an instant, it filled me up, holding my wrists tightly to my side and sinking deep into me.

I moan... oh yes.

'Damn it, Naddalin. You are so ready, 'he whispers reverently.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I hold him the only way I can as he remains to stand, staring at me, gray eyes shining, passionate and possessive. He's starting to move, really move. It's not making love, it's fucking - and I love it. I

moan. It's so raw, so carnal, driving me so insane. I revel in his possession, his lust extinguishing mine. He moves with ease, basking in me, like me, his lips parted slightly as his breathing quickens.

He twists his hips from side to side and the feel is exquisite.

Oh my. I close my eyes, feeling the buildup - this delicious, slow, climbing climb.

Pushing myself higher, higher towards the castle in the air. Oh yeah... her stroke increased slightly. I moan loudly. I'm all feeling... all of him, enjoying every push, every push that fills me. And he picks up the pace, pushing faster... harder... and my whole body moves at his pace, and I can feel my legs stiffen, and my insides shake and speed up.

'Come on, baby, give it up for me,' he coaxes through clenched teeth - and the fervent need in his voice - the tension - makes me lose my mind.

I scream a mute, passionate call as I touch the sun and burn, falling around it, falling back, returning to a luminous, gasping peak on Earth. It slams into me and

stops abruptly as it climaxes, pulling on my wrists and sinking Billie fully and without a word on me.

Wow... that was unexpected. I slowly materialize on Earth.

'What are you doing to me?' he breathes, stroking my neck. 'You have completely seduced me, Naddalin. You weave powerful magic.

He releases my wrists, and I run my fingers through his hair, coming down from my top. I tighten my legs around him.

'It is I who am seduced,' I whisper.

He looks up, looks at me, his expression bewildered, even alarmed. Placing his hands on either side of my face, he holds my head in place.

'You. Are. Mine,' he said, every word being a staccato. 'Do you understand?'

He's so serious, so passionate - a fanatic. The force of his call is so unexpected and disarming. I wonder why he feels like this.

'Yes, yours,' I whisper, derailed by his fervor.

'Are you sure you have to go to Georgia?'

I nod slowly. And in that brief moment, I can see his expression change, and the shutters come down. Abruptly, he pulls out, making me wince.

'Are you sore?' he asks, leaning over me.

'A little,' I admit.

'I love you badly.' His eyes are burning. 'Reminds you of where I have been, and only me.'

He grabs my chin and kisses me hard, then stands up and holds out his hand to help me up. I look at the foil bag next to me.

'Always prepared,' I whisper.

He looks at me confused as he remakes his fly. I lift the empty package.

'A man can hope, Naddalin, even dream, and sometimes his dreams come true.'

He looks so strange, his eyes burning. I just don't understand. My post-coital glow is quickly fading. What's his problem?

'So, on your desk, was it a dream?' I ask curtly, trying to humorously lighten the mood between us.

He smiles an enigmatic smile that doesn't reach his eyes, and I immediately know it's not the first time he's made love on his desk. Thought is not welcome. I squirm uncomfortably as my postcoital glow evaporates.

'I'd better go take a shower.' I get up and walk past him.

He frowns and runs a hand through his hair.

'I still have a few calls to make. I'll join you for breakfast once you get out of the shower. I think Mrs. Jones washed your clothes yesterday. They're in the closet.

What did she do? Jeez, could she hear us, I blush?

'Thanks,' I mumble.

'You're welcome,' he replies automatically, but there is an advantage in his voice.

I'm not saying thank you for fucking me. Although it was very...

'What?' He asks, and I realize I'm frowning.

'What's wrong?' I ask gently.

'What do you mean?'

'Well... you're weirder than usual.'

'Do you find me weird?' He tries to stifle a smile.

I'm blushing.

'Sometimes.'

He looks at me for a moment, his eyes speculative.

'As always, I am surprised by you, Miss Black.'

'Surprised how?'

'Let's just say it was an unexpected treat.'

``We aim to please Mr. Maury. I tilt my head to the side as he often does and returns his words to him.

'And please, you do,' he says, but looks uncomfortable. 'I thought you were going to take a shower.'

Oh, he's firing me.

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'Yeah... uh, I'll see you in a moment.' I rushed out of his office completely stunned.

He looked confused. Why I have to say that the physical experiences are going, it was very satisfying. But emotionally - well, I'm rocked by her reaction, and it was about as emotionally rewarding as cotton candy is nutritious.

Mrs. Jones is still in the kitchen.

'Would you like your tea now, Miss Black?'

'I'm going to take a shower first, thank you,' I mumble and quickly walk my flaming face out of the room.

In the shower, I try to figure out what's going on with Grayson. She's the

most complicated person I know and can't understand her ever-changing moods. He looked good when I walked into his office. We had sex... and then he wasn't. No, I do not understand. I look at my subconscious. She whistles her hands behind her back and looks away from me. She doesn't have a clue, and my inner goddess always basks in a remnant of post-coital glow. No - we are all ignorant.

I towel dry my hair, style it with Grayson's only hair accessory, and put it in a bun. Maury's plum dress is washed and ironed in the closet with my bra and panties clean. Mrs. Jones is a wonder. Pulling on Maury's shoes, I straighten my dress, take a deep breath, and walk back to the great room.

Grayson is still missing and Mrs. Jones is checking the contents of the pantry.

'Tea now, Miss Black?' She asks.

'Please.' I smile at him. I feel a little more confident now that I'm dressed

'Do you want to eat something?'

'No thanks.'

'Of course, you will have something to eat,' Grayson snaps, his eyes dark. 'She loves pancakes, bacon, and eggs, Mrs. Jones.

'Yes, Mr. Maury. What do you want, sir.

'Omelet, please, and some fruit.' He doesn't take his eyes off me, his expression was unfathomable. 'Sit down,' he orders, pointing to one of the bar stools.

I oblige, and he sits down next to me while Mrs. Jones tends to breakfast. Gosh, it's annoying that someone else is listening to our conversation.

'Did you buy your plane ticket?'

'No, I'll buy it when I get home - on the Internet.'

He leans on his elbow, rubbing his chin.

'Do you have the money?'

Oh no.

'Yes,' I said with false patience as if I was talking to a small child.

He raises a censored eyebrow at me. Shit.

'Yes, I do, thanks,' I quickly edit.

'I have a jet. It is not planned to be used for three days, it is available to you.'

I am speechless. Of course, he's got a throw, and I have to resist my body's natural inclination to roll my eyes at him. I want to laugh. But I don't, because I can't read his mood.

'We have made serious abuse of your company's aviation fleet before. I wouldn't want to do it again.'

'This is my company also in Pittsburgh is steel, this is my jet.' He almost looks hurt. Oh, the boys and their toys!

'Thanks for the offer. But I'd be happier to take a scheduled flight.'

He seems to want to argue more but decides not to.

'As you want,' he sighs. 'Do you have a lot of preparation to do for your interview?'

'No.'

'Good. You're still not going to tell me which publishing houses?'

'No.'

Her lips curl up in a reluctant smile.

'I am a man of means, Miss Black.'

'I am fully aware of this, Mr. Maury. Are you going to track my phone? I ask innocently.

'Actually, I'll be pretty busy this afternoon, so I'm going to have to get someone else to do it.'

He smiles.

Is he kidding?

'If you can spare someone to do this, you're obviously overstaffed.'

'I'm going to email the human resources manager and ask her to look at our workforce.' Her lips twist to hide her smile.

Oh thank you, Lord, he got his sense of humor back.

Mrs. Jones serves us breakfast and we eat quietly for a few moments. After cleaning the pots, tactfully, she leaves the living room. I am watching him.

'What is it, Naddalin?'

'You know, you never told me why you don't like to be touched.'

He turns white, and his reaction makes me feel guilty for asking.

'I've told you more than I've ever told anyone.' His voice is calm as he looks at me impassively.

-And-

It is clear to me that he never confides in anyone. Doesn't he have close friends? Maybe he told Ms. MLF stifler’s mom wanted to ask her, but I can't - I can't force this invasively. I shake my head at the realization. It is an island.

'Will you be thinking about our arrangement while you are away?' He asks.

'Yes.'

'Will you miss me?

I look at him, surprised by his question.

'Yes,' I answered honestly.

How could he have meant so much to me in such a short time? It's under my skin... literally. He smiles and his eyes light up.

'I'll miss you too. More than you think,' he hisses.

My heart warms at his words. He's trying hard. He gently strokes my cheek, leans in, and kisses me softly.

It's late afternoon, and I'm sitting nervous and restless in the lobby waiting for MJ Hyde from New York Independent Publishing. This is my second interview today and the one that worries me the most. My first interview went well, but it was for a larger conglomerate with offices based across the United States, and I would be one of the many editorial assistants there. I can imagine being swallowed up and spat out pretty quickly in such a corporate machine.

SIP is where I want to be. He's small and unconventional, champions local

writers, and has an interesting and quirky client list.

My surroundings are sparse, but I think it's a statement of design rather than frugality. I'm sitting on one of the two dark green leather chesterfield sofas - much like the sofa, Grayson has in his playroom. I stroke the leather with appreciation and lazily wonder what Grayson is doing on this couch. My mind wanders, thinking of the possibilities... no - I don't have to go now. I blush at my capricious and inappropriate thoughts.

The receptionist is a young African American woman with large silver earrings and long slicked-back hair. She has a bohemian air, the kind of woman I could be friends with. The thought is comforting. At all times, she looks at me, away from her computer, and smiles reassuringly. I temporarily returned her smile.

My flight is booked; my mother is in seventh heaven that I visit; I'm packed and Maury has agreed to drive me to the airport. Grayson ordered me to take my BlackBerry and the Mac. I roll my eyes at the memory of his bossy authoritarianism, but now I realize that's how he is. He likes to control everything, including me. Yet it is

also so unpredictable and disarming. He can be tender, cheerful, even gentle. And when it is, it's so left on the ground and unexpected. He insisted on accompanying me to my car in the garage. Damn, I'm only going for a few days, he acts like I've been going for weeks. He keeps me on the back foot at all times.

'Naddalin Black? A woman with long, black Pre-Raphaelite hair, standing near the reception desk, distracts me from my introspection. She has the same bohemian and flowing look as the receptionist. She could be in her thirties, maybe in her forties. It's so hard to tell with older women.

'Yes,' I replied, holding myself awkwardly.

She gives me a polite smile, her cool hazel eyes assessing me. I'm wearing one of Maury's dresses, a black apron over a white blouse and my black pumps. Very interview, I think. My hair is pulled back in a pot Pittsburgh tail, and for once the tendrils behave on their own... she holds out her hand to me.

'Hi Naddalin, my name is Elizabeth Morgan. I'm the Human Resources

Manager here at SIP.' 'How are you?' I shake his hand. She seems very relaxed to be the head of human resources.

'Please follow me.'

We go through the double doors behind the reception, we enter a large brightly colored open-plan office, and from there we make our way to a small meeting room. The walls are pale green, lined with photos of book covers. At the head of the Maplewood, conference table is a young man with red hair tied in a pot Pittsburgh tail. Small silver earrings sparkle in both ears. He wears a pale blue shirt, no tie, and Maury flannel pants. As I approach him, he stands up and looks at me with unfathomable dark blue eyes.

'Naddalin Black, I'm Jack Hyde, the editor-in-chief here at SIP, and it's great to meet you.'

We shake hands, and his dark expression is unreadable, though quite friendly, I think.

'Have you traveled far?' He asks pleasantly.

'No, I recently moved to the Pike Street Market area.'

'Oh, not far at all then. Please sit down.'

I sit down and Elizabeth takes a seat next to him.

'So why would you want to intern for us at SIP, Naddalin?' he asks.

He said my name softly and cocked his head to the side, like someone I know - it's baffling. Doing my best to ignore the irrational distrust he inspires, I launch into my carefully prepared speech, aware that a pink blush is spreading across my cheeks. I watch them both, remembering The Mary Smith Successful Interviewing Technique - maintain eye contact, Naddalin! Boy, this woman can be bossy too sometimes. Jack and Elizabeth both listen intently.

'You have a very impressive GPA. What extracurricular activities have you engaged in at OVHS?'

Do me a favor, I blink at him. What a strange choice of words. I dive into the details of my librarianship at the central campus library and my only experience interviewing an obscenely rich bully for the student magazine. I ignore the part where I didn't write the article. I mention the two

literary societies I belonged to and end with a job at Eastwood and all the unnecessary knowledge I now have on hardware and DIY.

They both laugh, which I hoped. Slowly I relax and start having fun.

Jack Hyde asks sharp and intelligent questions, but I don't mind - I keep going, and when we discuss my reading preferences and favorite books, I think I'm doing fine. Jack, on the other hand, seems to favor only American literature written after 1950. Nothing else.

No classics - not even Henry James or Upton Sinclair or F Scott Fitzgerald. Elizabeth doesn't say anything, nods occasionally, and takes notes. Jack, while argumentative, is charming in his way, and my initial suspicion dissipates as we speak.

'And where do you see yourself in five years?' he asks.

With Grayson Murray, the idea involuntarily comes to mind. My wandering mind makes me frown. 'Copy editing maybe. Maybe a literary agent, I'm not sure. I'm open to opportunities.' He smiles. 'Very well, Naddalin. I have no more

questions. How about you?' he addressed his question to me. 'When would you like someone to start?' I ask. 'As soon as possible,' Elizabeth said. 'When could you start?' 'I am available from next week.' 'Good to know,' said Jack. 'If that's all Pittsburgh one has to say,' Elizabeth looks at both of us, 'I think that wraps up the interview.' She smiles sweetly. 'It was a pleasure meeting you, Naddalin,' Jack said softly, taking my hand. He squeezes him gently so that I blink at him as I say goodbye to him. I feel unsteady as I walk towards my car, although I don't know why.

I think the interview went well, but it's so hard to tell. Interviews seem like artificial situations, each of their best behavior desperately trying to hide behind a professional facade. Was my face okay? I'll have to wait and see. I get in my Audi A3 and go back to the apartment, even if I take time. I'm on red eyes with a layover in Atlanta, but my flight doesn't leave until 10:25 am tonight, so I have plenty of time. Maury is unpacking boxes in the kitchen when I get back. 'How did they go?' she asks excitedly. Only Maury can look stunning in an oversized shirt, ragged jeans, and a dark blue bandana. 'Good, thanks, Maury.

I'm not sure this outfit is cool enough for the second interview.' 'Oh?' 'Boho-chic could have done it.' Maury raises an eyebrow. 'You and boho-chic.' She tilts her head to one side - Gah! Why Everyone Reminds Me of My Favorite numerous Shadows,' Naddalin, you're one of the few people who can get that look away.' I smile. 'I liked the second place. I think I could fit in there. The guy who interviewed me was annoying though,' I stop - shit I'm talking to Foghorn Smith here. Shut up Naddalin! 'Oh?' Mary Smith's radar for interesting information kicks in - a tidbit that will only resurface at an inopportune and embarrassing time, which reminds me. 'Incidentally - would you please stop picking up Grayson? Your comment about Sam yesterday at dinner was irrelevant. He's a jealous guy. It's no use, you know.' 'Look, if he wasn't Jack's brother I would have said a lot worse. He's a real control freak. I don't know how you put up with him. I was trying to make him jealous - give - him a little help with his. engagement issues. 'She throws her hands up defensively.

'But - if you don't want me to intervene, I won't,' she said hastily through my scowl. 'Good. Life with Grayson is complicated enough, trust me.' Damn, I

look like him. 'Naddalin,' she stops, staring at me. 'You're okay, aren't you? Aren't you running to your mother's house to escape?' I rinse. 'No Maury. You said I needed a break.' She narrows the distance between us and takes my hands - one of the most unpleasant things to do in Murray. Oh no... tears threaten. 'You are just, I don't know... different. I hope you are doing well, and whatever problems you have with Mr. Moneybags, you can talk to me. And I will try not to dispel it., but frankly, it's like shooting a fish in a barrel with it. Listen, Naddalin, if something's wrong you'll tell me, I won't judge. I'll try to understand. 'I'm blinking. tears. 'Oh, Maury. I hug her. 'I think I fell in love with him.' 'Naddalin, anyone can see that. And he's fallen in love with you. He's mad at you. He won't take his eyes off.' I laugh at the uncertainty. 'Do you think so?' 'Didn't he tell you?' 'Not in so many words.' 'Did you tell him?'

'Not in so many words.' I shrug my shoulders to apologize. 'Naddalin! Someone has to take the first step, or you're not going to Pittsburgh where.' What... tell him how I feel? 'I'm just afraid to scare him.' 'And how do you know he doesn't feel the same way?' 'Grayson, scared, I can't imagine him being afraid of anything.' But

as I say the words, I imagine him as a little child. Maybe fear was all he knew then. Sorrow grips and grips my heart at the thought. Maury looks at me with pursed lips and narrowed eyes, much like my subconscious - all she needs are the halfpipe specs. 'You have to sit down and talk to each other.' 'We haven't talked much lately.' I rinse. Other things. Non-verbal communication and it's okay. Well, more than good. She smiles. 'It'll be the sexing! If that goes well, then that's half the battle Naddalin. I'm going to have some Chinese takeout. Are you ready to go?' 'I will - we don't have to be gone for a few hours or so.' 'No, I'll see you at twenty.' She grabs her jacket and leaves, forgetting to close the door. I closed it behind her and walked to my room, considering her words. Is Grayson afraid of his feelings for me? Does he even have feelings for me? surely. I realize that while I'm away, I'll have to go through all of our conversations again and see if I can spot any telltale signs. I will miss you too... more than you think... you completely seduced me... I shake my head. I don't want to think about it now.

I'm charging the BlackBerry, so I haven't had it with me all afternoon. I approach it with caution and am

disappointed that there are no messages. I turn on the average machine, and there are no messages either. Same email address Naddalin - my subconscious is staring at me and for the first time, I understand why Grayson wants to spank me when I do this. Okay. Well, I'll write him an email. From: Naddalin Black Subject: Interviews Date: May 30, 2009, 6:49 PM To Grayson Murray Dear, Sir My interviews went well today. We think you might be interested. How was your day? Naddalin I sit down and look at the screen. Grayson's responses are usually instantaneous. I wait... and I wait, and finally, I hear the welcome ping from my inbox. From: Grayson Murray Subject: My Day Date: May 30, 2009, 7:03 PM To Naddalin Black Deer, Miss Black Everything you do interests me, you are the most fascinating woman I know.

I'm glad your talks went well. My morning exceeded all expectations. My afternoon was very boring in comparison. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: Fine Morning Date: May 30, 2009, 7:05 PM To Grayson Maury Dear, Sir The morning has been exemplary for me too, despite you astounding me after the impeccable office sex. Don't think I haven't noticed. Thanks

for the breakfast. Or thank you, Mrs. Jones. I would like to ask you some questions about it - without you pushing my head again. Naddalin My finger hovers over the send button, and I'm reassured that I'll be on the other side of the continent this time around tomorrow. From: Grayson Murray Subject: The publication and you? Date: May 30, 2009, 7:10 PM To Naddalin Black Naddalin 'Weird' is not a verb and should not be used by anyone wishing to get into publishing.

Impeccable Compared to what, pray, say it And what do you have to ask about Mrs. Jones I'm intrigued. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: You and Ms. Jones Date: May 30, 2009, 7:17 PM To Grayson Murray Dear, Sir Language is evolving and moving on. It's an organic thing. It's not stuck in an ivory tower, hanging from expensive works of art, and overlooking most of New York City with a helipad glued to its roof. Impeccable - compared to other times we have... what's your word... oh yeah... fucked. The fuck was pretty flawless, period, IMHO - but as you know I have very limited experience. Is Mrs. Jones your old submarine? Naddalin My finger hovers over the send button

again and I press it. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Language. Watch your mouth! Date: May 30, 2009, 7:22 PM To Naddalin Black Naddalin Ms. Jones is a valued employee.

I never had a relationship with her beyond our professional relationship. I do not employ anyone with whom I have had sex. I'm shocked you think so. The only person I would take exception to this rule is you - because you are a bright young woman with remarkable negotiating skills. However, if you continue to use such language, I may have to reconsider taking you here. I'm glad you have limited experience. Your experience will continue to be limited - just for me. I'll take the flawlessness as a compliment - although, with you, I never know if that's what you mean, or if your sense of iroPittsburgh takes over - as usual. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Her Ivory Tower From Naddalin Black Subject: Not For All Tea In China Date: May 30, 2009, 7:27 PM To Grayson Murray Dear, Mr. Maury, I think I voiced it before my reservations to work for your company Pittsburgh. My views on this have not changed, do not change, and never will. I have to leave you now because Maury has

returned with food. My sense of eros Pittsburgh and I wish you good night. I will contact you once I am in Georgia. Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: Even Twinings English Breakfast Tea?

Date: May 30, 2009, 7:29 PM To Naddalin Black Goodnight Naddalin. Hope you and your sense of eros Pittsburgh have a good flight. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Maury, and I pull up outside the drop-off area at the Sea-Tac airport terminal. Leaning across, she hugs me. 'Enjoy Barbados, Maury. Have a wonderful vacation.' 'I'll see you when I come back. Don't let the old bags of money crush you.' 'I will not do it.' We kiss again - then I'm alone. I head to check-in and stand in line, waiting with my carry-on baggage. I didn't bother with a suitcase, just a smart backpack Ray gave me for my last birthday. 'Ticket please?' The bored young man behind the desk raises his hand without looking at me. Reflecting on his boredom, I hand in my ticket and driver's license as ID. I hope for a window seat if possible.

'Okay, Miss Black. You've been upgraded to first class.' 'What?' 'Ma'am, if you want to go to the first class lounge and wait for your flight there.' He seems to have

woken up and beams at me like I'm the Christmas fairy and the Easter bunny in one. 'There must be a mistake.' 'No no.' He checks his computer screen again. 'Naddalin Black - upgrade.' He's cooking me. Ugh. I squint my eyes. He hands me my boarding pass and I walk into the first class lounge, muttering under my breath. Damn control freak Grayson Maury - he just can't get away well enough on his own.

I am treated, massaged and I drank two glasses of champagne. The First Class lounge has many great features. With every sip of Moët, I feel a little more inclined to forgive Grayson and his intervention. I open my MacBook, hoping to test the theory that it works in Pittsburgh where on the planet.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Too extravagant gestures

Date: May 30, 2009 9:53 p.m.

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

What worries me is how you knew which flight I was on.

Your hunt knows no bounds. Hopefully, Dr. LORENZO is back from vacation.

I had a manicure, a back massage, and two glasses of champagne - a great start to the holiday.

Thank you.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: You are welcome

Date: May 30, 2009 9:59 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black The

Dr. LORENZO is back, and I have an appointment this week.

Who massaged your back?

Grayson Murray

CEO with friends in all the right places, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Aha! The time of the refund. Our flight has been called, so I'll email her from the plane. It will be safer. I almost hug myself with mischievous glee.

There is so much room in first class. Cocktail of champagne in hand, I settle into the plush leather window seat as

the cabin slowly fills. I call Ray to tell him where I am

- a fortunately brief call, because it is too late for him.

'I love you daddy,' I whisper.

'You too, girly. Say hello to your mother. Good night.'

'Good evening.' I'm hanging up.

Ray is in good shape. I look at my Mac and with the same building of childish joy.

When I open my laptop, I log into the email program.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Strong Able Hands

Date: May 30, 2009, 10:22 p.m.

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Sir

A very nice young man massaged my back. Yes. Very pleasant indeed. I would not have met Jean-Paul in the regular departure lounge - so thank you again for the treat. I'm not sure if I'll be allowed to email once we take off, and I need my restful sleep because I haven't been sleeping so well lately.

The most peasantleasant dreams Mr. Maury... thinking of you.

Naddalin

Oh, he's going to turn around - and I'll be up in the air and out of reach. Serves him well.

If I had been in the regular departure lounge, Jean-Paul would not have reached out to me. He was a very nice young man, in a blonde, permanently tanned manner - honestly, who has a tan in New York. This is so wrong. I think he was gay - but I'll keep that detail to myself. I look at my email. Maury is right. It's like shooting a fish in a barrel with it. My subconscious is staring at me with an ugly twist to its mouth - do you want to turn it up? What he did was nice, you know! He cares about you and wants you to travel style. Yes, but he could have asked or told me. It didn't make me look like a full klutz on the recording. I hit send and wait, feeling like a very naughty girl.

'Miss Black, you'll need to put your laptop away for take off,' the oversized flight attendant said politely. She makes me jump. My guilty conscience is at work.

'Oh sorry.'

Shit. Now I'll have to wait to find out if he answered. She hands me a soft blanket and pillow, showing her perfect teeth. I drape the blanket over my knees. It's nice to feel mollycoddle sometimes.

The cabin has filled up, except for the seat next to me which is still unoccupied. Oh no... a disturbing thought crosses my mind. Maybe the seat is Grayson's. Oh shit… no… he wouldn't do that. Would he tell me that I didn't want him to come with me? I glance anxiously at my watch, then the disembodied voice from the cockpit announces, 'Cabin crew, auto and cross-control doors.' What miNaddalin are they shutting the doors My goals as I sit in throbbing anticipation?

The seat next to me is the only one unoccupied in the sixteen-seat cabin. The plane jumps away from its support, and I breathe a sigh of relief, but I also feel a slight tingling of disappointment... no Grayson for four days. I glance at my BlackBerry. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Enjoy it while you can Date: May 30, 2009, 10:25 PM To Naddalin Black Deer, Miss Black I know what you are trying to do - and believe me - you have succeeded. Next

time you will be in the cargo hold, tied up, and gagged in a crate. Believe me when I tell you that taking care of you in this state will give me so much more pleasure than just upgrading your ticket. I look forward to your return.

Grayson Murray Palm-Twitching CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Holy shit. That's the problem with Grayson's humor - I can never be sure if he's joking or if he's seriously angry. I suspect on this occasion that he is seriously angry. Surreptitiously, so the flight attendant couldn't see, I typed an answer under the blanket. From: Naddalin Black Subject: kidding? Date: May 30, 2009, 10:30 PM To Grayson Murray You see - I don't know if you're kidding - and if you're not - then I think I'm going to stay in Georgia. Checkouts are a tough limit for me. Sorry for driving you crazy. Tell me you forgive me. To Frommollycoddled Grayson Murray Subject: Joke Date: May 30, 2009, 10:31 PM To Naddalin Black How do you send emails? Risk the lives of everyone on board, including yourself, by using your BlackBerry I think this is against one of the rules. Grayson Maury Two Palms Twitching CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Two Palms! I put my BlackBerry away, sit

down as the plane rolls down to the runway, and pull out my tattered copy of Tess - a light read for the trip. Once we're in flight, I tilt my seat back, and soon I fall asleep.

The flight attendant wakes me up as we begin our descent to Atlanta. Local time is 5h 45, but I only slept about four hours... I feel dizzy, but grateful for the glass of orange juice she hands me. I looked nervously at my BlackBerry. There are no more emails from Grayson. Well, it's almost three in the morning in New York City, and he probably wants to discourage me from screwing up the avionics system, or whatever keeps planes from flying if cell phones are on.

The wait in Atlanta is only an hour. And again, I lounge within the confines of the first-class lounge. I'm tempted to curl up and fall asleep on one of the plush, inviting sofas that gently sink under my weight. But it just won't be long enough. To keep me awake, I run a long stream of consciousness to Grayson on my laptop.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Do you like to scare me?

Date: May 31, 2009 6:52 AM EST

To: Grayson Maury

You know how much I don't like you spending money on me. Yes, you're very rich, but it still makes me uncomfortable, like you're paying me for sex. However, I like to travel first class, it's so much more civilized than the coach. So thanks. I think so - and I enjoyed Jean Paul's message. He was very gay. I omitted this passage from my email to wind you up because I was angry with you, and I'm sorry for that.

But as usual, you overreact. You can't write me things like this - bound and gagged in a crate - (were you serious or was that a joke?) That scares me... you scare me... I'm completely taken in by your charm, considering a lifestyle with you that I didn't even know existed until last Saturday, and then you write something like that and I want to run screaming in the hills. I won't, of course, because I would miss you. I miss you. I want us to work, but I'm terrified of how deep I feel for you and how dark you are leading me. What you are offering is erotic and sexy, and I'm curious, but I'm also worried that you will hurt me - physically and emotionally. After three

months you could say goodbye, and where will that leave me if you do? But then I guess risk exists in any relationship. It's just not the kind of relationship I envisioned having, especially as my first one. It's a huge leap of faith for me.

You were right when you said I don't have submissive bones in my body… and I agree with you now. That said, I want to be with you, and if that's what I have to do, I'd love to give it a try, but I think I'll suck and end up black and blue - and I don't like that idea at all.

I'm so glad you said you'd try more. I just need to think about what

'More' means to me, and that's one of the reasons I wanted some distance. You dazzle me so much that I have a hard time thinking clearly when we are together.

They call my flight. I have to go.

Later

Your Naddalin.

I hit send and went asleep at the boarding gate to board another plane.

This one only has six seats in First Class, and once we're up in the air, I snuggle up under my plush blanket and fall asleep.

Too early I'm awakened by the flight attendant offering me more orange juice as we begin our approach to Savannah International. I sip slowly, past the fatigue, and allow myself to feel a minimum of excitement. I am going to see my mother for the first time in six months. Sneaking another secret look at my BlackBerry, I vaguely remember sending Grayson a long email - but there was nothing in response. It's five in the morning in New York - I hope he's still sleeping and not ready to play sad laments on his piano.

The beauty of cabin backpacks is that you can get out of the airport in the breeze and not have to wait forever for luggage at the carousels. The beauty of traveling first class is that they let you get off the plane first.

My mom is waiting with Bob, and it's so good to see them. I don't know if it's because of the exhaustion, the long trip, or the whole situation with Grayson, but as soon as I'm in my mother's arms, I burst into tears.

'Oh Naddalin, honey. You must be so tired.' She glances at Bob anxiously.

'No mom, it's just - I'm so glad to see you.' I hug her tightly.

She feels so good and welcoming and at home. Reluctantly, I give him up, and Bob gives me an awkward hug on one arm. He seems unsteady on his feet and I remember he injured his leg.

'Welcome back, Naddalin. Why are you crying?' he asks. 'Oh, Bob, it's just good to see you too.' I look at her beautiful square-jawed face and her sparkling blue eyes gazing at me fondly. I love this husband, mom. You can keep it. He takes my backpack. 'Damn, Naddalin, what have you got here?' It'll be the Mac, and they both put their arms around me as we walked into the parking lot. I always forget how incredibly hot it is in Savannah. Leaving the cool air-conditioned confines of the arrival terminal, we step into the Georgia heat as we wear it. Whoa!

It undermines everything. I have to get rid of mom and Bob's hug so I can get my hoodie off. I'm so glad I packed some shorts. I miss the dry heat of Vegas sometimes, where I lived with mom and

Bob when I was seventeen, but that humid heat, even at 8:30 a.m, takes some getting used to. By the time I'm in the back of Bob's wonderfully air-conditioned Tahoe SUV, I feel limp and my hair has started a frizzy protest at the heat.

In the back of the SUV, I quickly write to Ray, Maury, and Grayson:

~ <3 Arrived safely in Savannah. R :-) ~

My thoughts wander briefly to Sam as I hit send, and through the haze of my fatigue, I remember it's her show next week. Should I invite Grayson to know what he thinks of Sam? Grayson will still want to see me after this email, I shudder at the thought, then put it out of my mind. I will come back to this later. Right now, I will be enjoying my mother's company.

'Honey, you must be tired. Would you like to sleep when we get home?'

'No, mom. I would like to go to the beach.'

I am in my blue halter tankini, sipping a diet Coke, on a deckchair facing the Atlantic Ocean, and I think that just

yesterday I was looking at the Sound towards the Pacific.

My mom sits next to me in a ridiculously large sun hat and Jackie O sunglasses, sipping her own Coke. We are on Tybee Island Beach, just three blocks from the house.

She is holding my hand. My fatigue has decreased and by taking the sun I feel comfortable, safe, and warm. For the first time in forever, I started to relax.

'So-o Naddalin... tell me about this man who's got you in such a mess.'

Turn! How can she say What to say? I can't talk about Grayson in detail because of the NDA, but even then, if I choose to tell my mom about it, I would whitewash the thought.

'Good?' she invites me over and shakes my hand.

'His name is Grayson. He is more than handsome. He is rich... too rich. He is very complicated and mercurial.'

Yes, I feel extremely satisfied with my concise and precise summary. I turn to face her, just as she makes the same

movement. She looks at me with her crystal blue eyes.

'Complicated and mercurial are the two pieces of information I want to focus on, Naddalin.'

Oh no...!!!

'Oh, mum, his mood swings make me dizzy. He had a dark upbringing, so he's very closed, hard to assess.'

'Do you love him?'

'I love him more than that.'

'Really?' She mouths me speechless.

'Yes mom.'

'Men are not complicated, Naddalin, honey. They are very simple, literal creatures.

They generally mean what they say. And we spend hours trying to analyze what they said - when it is really obvious. If I were you, I would take it literally. It might help. '

I am speechless. Sounds like good advice. Take Grayson literally. Immediately some of the things he said come to mind.

I do not want to lose you...

You have bewitched me...

You completely seduced me...

I will miss you too... more than you know...

I look at my mother. She is on her fourth marriage. Maybe she knows something about men after all.

'Most men are my brooding sweetheart, some more than others. Take your father for example...' Her eyes soften and sorrow whenever she thinks of my father. My real father, this mythical man I never knew, tore us so cruelly in a combat training accident when he was a sailor. Part of me thinks my mom has been looking for someone like my dad all this time... maybe she finally found what she was looking for in Bob. Too bad she can't find him with Ray.

'I used to think your dad was in a bad mood. But now when I look back I just think he was too caught up in his job and trying to make a living for us. She sighs.

'He was so young, we both were. Maybe that was the problem.'

Hmm... Grayson is not old. I smile affectionately at him. She can get very touching thinking about my father, but I'm sure he had nothing on Grayson's moods.

'Bob wants to take us out for dinner tonight. To his golf club.'

'Oh no! Bob started playing golf?' I laugh in disbelief.

'Tell me about this,' my mother moaned, rolling her eyes.

After a light lunch back home, I start to unpack. I'll treat myself to a siesta. My mom's gone to cast candles or whatever she's doing with them, and Bob's at work, so I have time to get some sleep. I open the Mac and run it.

It's two in the afternoon in Georgia, eleven in the morning in New York. I wonder if I have a response from Grayson. Nervously, I logged into the mail program.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Finally!

Date: May 31, 2009 7:30 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Naddalin

I'm annoyed that as soon as you put some distance between us, you openly and honestly communicate with me. Why can't you do this when we're together?

Yes, I am rich. Get used to it. Why shouldn't I spend the money on you? We told your dad that I'm your boyfriend, for heaven's sake. Isn't that what boyfriends do. As your Dom, I would expect you to accept whatever I spend on you without any arguments. By the way, tell your mother that too.

I don't know how to respond to your comment about feeling like a whore. I know that's not what you wrote, but that's what you're implying. I don't know what I can say or do to eradicate these feelings. I wish you had the best of everything. I work extremely hard so I can spend my money however I want. I could buy your heart's desire from you, Naddalin, and I want it. Call it wealth redistribution if you will. Or just knowing that I couldn't, I could never think of you the way you described it, and

I'm angry that you perceive yourself. For such a bright, witty, and beautiful young woman, you have real self-esteem issues, and I have half a mind to make an appointment for you with Dr. LORENZO.

I apologize for scaring you. I find the idea of instilling fear in you odious. Do you think I would let you travel in the hold, I gave you my private jet for heaven's sake. Yes, it was a joke, obviously a bad one. However, the point is, the thought of you being tied up and gagged turns me on (not kidding - it is.) I can lose the cash register - the cash registers do nothing for me. I know you have gag issues we talked about it and if / when I gag you, we'll discuss it. What I think you don't realize is that in Dom / Sub relationships, it's the sub that has all the power. It's you. I will repeat this - you are the one with all the power. Not me. In the boathouse, you said no. I can't touch you if you say no - that's why we have a deal - what you will and will not do. If we try things out and you don't like them, we can revise the deal. It's up to you - not me. And if you don't want to be bound and gagged in a crate, that's not going to happen.

I want to share my lifestyle with you. I never wanted anything so much. Frankly, I am in awe of you whoever is so innocent would be willing to give it a try. It says more about me than you could ever imagine. Can't you see I'm caught up in your spell too, even though I've told you countless times? I do not want to lose you. I am worried that you have traveled three thousand kilometers to get away from me for a few days because you cannot think clearly around me. It's the same for me Naddalin. My reason disappears when we are together -

This is the depth of my feelings for you.

I understand your apprehension. I tried to stay away from you; I knew you were inexperienced, although I would never have sued you if I had known exactly how innocent you were - and yet you still do it to completely disarms me in a way no one has ever experienced before... Your email for example I have read and reread countless times trying to understand your point of view. Three months is an arbitrary length. We could do six months a year. How long do you want this to be? What would make you comfortable?

Tell me.

I understand this is a huge leap of faith for you. I have to earn your trust, but at the same time, you have to communicate with me when I fail to do so. You seem so strong and self-sufficient, then I read what you wrote here, and I see another side of you. We need to guide each other, Naddalin, and I can only inspire you. You have to be honest with me and we both have to find a way to make this arrangement work.

You worry about not being submissive. Well, maybe it's true. That said, the only

Once you have the right behavior for a submarine, it's in the playroom. It seems like this is the only place where you allow me to exercise proper control over you, and the only place where you do as you are told. The term that comes to mind is exemplary. And I never beat you black and blue. I'm aiming for pink. Outside of the playroom, I like you to challenge me. It's a very new and refreshing experience, and I wouldn't want to change that. So yeah, tell me what you want in terms of more. I will try to keep an open mind and try to give you the space you need and stay away from

you while you are in Georgia. I look forward to your next email.

In the meantime, have fun. But not too much.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Holy shit. He wrote an essay like we were back to school - and most of it was good. My heart is in my mouth as I reread his epistle, and I curl up on the spare bed, practically hugging my Mac. Make our deal a year, I have the power! Damn, I'm gonna have to think about it. Take it literally, that's what my mother says. He doesn't want to lose me.

He said that twice! He also wants it to work. Oh Grayson, me too! He will try to stay away! Does that mean he might not stay away? Suddenly I hope so. I want to see him. We've been apart for less than twenty-four hours, and knowing that I can't see him for four days, I realize how much I miss him. How much I love him.

'Naddalin, honey. The voice is soft and warm, full of love and sweet memories of the past. A soft hand brushes my face.

My mom wakes me up and I'm wrapped around my laptop, hugging it against me.

'Naddalin, sweetheart,' she continued in her sweet singing voice as I resumed my sleep, blinking in the pale pink light of dusk.

'Hi Mom.' I stretch and smile.

'We're going to have dinner in thirty minutes.' Do you still want to come? she asks gently.

'Oh, yeah, mom, sure.' I try very hard, but I can't seem to stifle my yawn.

'Now that's awesome technology.' She shows me my laptop.

Oh shit.

'Oh... that?' I am looking for a relaxed and surprising nonchalance.

Mom will notice that she seems to have gotten smarter since I acquired a 'boyfriend'.

'Grayson loaned it to me. I think I could fly the space shuttle with it, but I only use it for email and Internet access.'

It is nothing. Looking at me suspiciously, she sits up on the bed and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear.

'Has he emailed you?'

Oh, shit on that piss.

'Yes.' My nonchalance wears off and I blush.

'Maybe she misses you, huh?'

'I hope so, mom.'

'What is he saying?'

Oh, frapping shit. I'm frantically trying to think of something acceptable from this email that I can tell my mom. I'm sure she doesn't want to hear about Doms, bondage, and gagging, but I can't tell her because there is the NDA.

'He told me to have fun, but not too much.'

'Sounds reasonable. I'll let you get ready, honey.' Leaning down, she kisses my forehead. 'I'm so glad you're here, Naddalin. It's wonderful to see you. And with this declaration of love, she leaves.

Hmm, Grayson and Reasonable… two concepts that I thought were mutually exclusive, but after his email anything is possible. I shake my head. I will need some time to digest his words. Probably after dinner - and I can answer him then. I get out of bed and quickly slip my t-shirt and shorts on, and head for the shower.

I brought Maury's gray halter neck dress I wore for my graduation. It's the only dressy item I have. A good thing about the heat is that the creases have fallen out so I think that will do the trick for the golf club. While dressing, I wake up the laptop. There is nothing new from Grayson, and I feel a hint of disappointment. Very quickly, I typed him an email.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Verbose?

Date: May 31, 2009 7:08 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Sir, you are a fairly talkative writer. I have to go to dinner at Bob's Golf Club, and just to let you know, I roll my eyes at the thought. But you and your sinewy palm are far away from me, so my

butt is safe, for now. I loved your email. Will respond when I can. I already miss you.

Enjoy your afternoon.

Your Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your behind

Date: May 31, 2009 4:10 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

I am distracted by the title of this email. Needless to say, it's safe - for now.

Enjoy your dinner, and I miss you too, especially your butt and your smart mouth.

My afternoon will be dull, lit only by thoughts of you and your rolling eyes. I think it was you who so aptly pointed out to me that I too suffer from this bad habit.

Grayson Maury

CEO and Eye Roller, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Eye Rolling

Date: May 31, 2009 7:14 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

Stop emailing me. I'm trying to get ready for dinner. You are very distracting, even when you are on the other side of the continent. And yes - who spanks you when you roll your eyes?

Your Naddalin, I hit send, and immediately the image of that wicked witch Mrs. MLF stifler's mom comes to mind. I can't imagine it. Grayson being beaten by someone as old as my mom is so wrong. Again, I wonder what damage she has caused. My mouth hangs in a hard, sinister line. I need a doll to stick pins on, maybe that way I can vent some of the anger I feel against this stranger.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your behind

Date: May 31, 2009 4:18 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

I still prefer my title to yours, in so many different ways. I am lucky that I am the master of my destination Pittsburgh and that no one berates me. Except for my mom now and then and Dr. LORENZO, of course. And you.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Chastising... Me?

Date: May 31, 2009 7:22 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Sir

When have I ever had the courage to chastise you, Mr. Maury? I think you are mingling with someone else... which is very disturbing. I have to prepare myself.

Your Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your behind

Date: May 31, 2009 4:25 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

You do it all the time in print. Can I close your dress?

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

For some reason, his words slip off the page and make me gasp. Oh… he wants to play games.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: NC-17

Date: May 31, 2009 7:28 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

I'd rather you unzip it.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Be careful what you want…

Date: May 31, 2009 4:31 PM

To: Naddalin Black

SO WOULD BE I.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Panting

Date: May 31, 2009 7:33 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Slowly...

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Moan

Date: May 31, 2009, 4:35 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

I would have liked to be there.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Topic: Moans

Date: May 31, 2009 7:37 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

SO DO I -

'Naddalin!' My mother calls me, makes me jump. Shit. Why do I feel so guilty?

'I'm just coming, mom.'

From: Naddalin Black

Topic: Moans

Date: May 31, 2009 7:39 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Gotta go.

see yeah, baby.

I rush into the hallway where Bob and my mom are waiting. My mother frowns.

'Honey - you feel good, you look a little flushed.'

'Mom, I'm fine.'

'You are lovely, honey.'

'Oh, it's Maury's dress. Do you like it?'

His frown deepened.

'Why are you wearing Maury's dress?'

Oh no.

'Well, I like this one and she doesn't,' I improvise quickly.

She gazes at me with insight as Bob oozes impatience with his drunk, hungry-looking dog.

'I'll take you shopping tomorrow,' she said.

'Oh, mom, you don't need to do that. I have plenty of clothes.'

'I can't do something for my own daughter, come on, Bob is hungry.'

'Too good,' Bob moaned, rubbing his stomach and assuming a fake expression of pain.

I laugh as he rolls his eyes, and we head for the door.

Later, when I'm in the shower, cooling off under lukewarm water, I reflect on how much my mom has changed. Seeing her at dinner she was in her element, funny

and affectionate, and among many friends at the golf club. Bob was warm and caring… They seem so good to each other. I'm happy for her. It means I can stop worrying about her and questioning her decisions and putting husband number three dark days behind us both. Bob is a keeper. And she gives me good advice. When did it start?

Ever since I met Grayson. Why is that?

When I'm done, I quickly dry off, eager to get back to Grayson. There is an email waiting for me, sent just after I left for dinner a few hours ago.

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Plagiarism

Date: May 31, 2009, 4:41 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

You stole my line.

And let me hang.

Enjoy your dinner.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Who are you to cry, thief?

Date: May 31, 2009 10:18 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Sir, I think you will find that it was originally Jack's line.

Hang how?

Your Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Unfinished Business

Date: May 31, 2009 7:22 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Miss Black

You are back. You left so suddenly - just when things were getting interesting.

Jack is not very original. He will have stolen this line from someone.

How was dinner?

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Unfinished business?

Date: May 31, 2009 10:26 PM EST

To: Grayson Murray Le dinner was plentiful - you'll be very happy to hear, I've eaten way too much.

Become interesting, how?

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Unfinished business - definitely

Date: May 31, 2009 7:30 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Are you deliberately obtuse I think you just asked me to unzip your dress?

-And-

I couldn't wait to do just that. I am also happy to hear that you are eating.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Well... there is always the weekend

Date: May 31, 2009 10:36 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Of course, I eat... It is only the uncertainty I feel around you that puts me off my food.

-And-

I would never be subconsciously obtuse, Mr. Maury.

You have surely understood this by now;)

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: I can't wait

Date: May 31, 2009 7:40 PM

To: Naddalin Black

I will remember this, Miss Black, and no doubt use the knowledge to my advantage.

I'm sorry to hear that I've cut you off from your food. I thought I was having a more lustful effect on you. This has been my experience and it was also very pleasant.

I can't wait for the next time.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Linguistics of gymnastics

Date: May 31, 2009 10:36 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Have you played with the thesaurus again?

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Rumbled

Date: May 31, 2009 7:40 PM

To: Naddalin Black

You know me so well Miss Black.

I'm having dinner with an old friend now so I'll be driving.

(see yeah, baby?)

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

What an old friend I didn't think Grayson had any old friends except... her. I frown on the screen. Why does he still have to see her? A bold, green, bilious jealousy crosses me unexpectedly. I want to hit something, preferably Ms. MLF Stiffler’s mom. Shutting down the laptop in anger, I climb into bed.

I should respond to her long email this morning, but suddenly I'm too angry. Why can't he see her for what she is - a pedophile I turn off the light, bubbling, gazing into the darkness. How dare she? How dare she go after a vulnerable teenager? Does she still do it? Why did they stop? Various scenarios filter through my mind: he had had enough, so why is he still friends with her? having Grayson's children My subconscious rears its ugly head, peeping, and I'm shocked and nauseous at the thought. Does Dr. LORENZO know her?

I struggle to get out of bed and turn the wicked machine back on. I'm on a mission. I drummed my fingers impatiently as I waited for the blue screen to appear. I hit Google images and entered 'Grayson Murray' into the search engine. The screen is suddenly littered with pictures of Grayson: in a black tie, decent, jeez - the pictures of Sam from the Heathman, in his white shirt and flannel pants. How did they get on Internet Boy? He looks good.

I quickly move on: some with associates, then photo after image after glorious image of the most photogenic man I know, intimately. Do I know Grayson intimately, I know him sexually, and I think there is a lot more to discover out there. I know he's brooding, difficult, funny, cold, hot... damn, man is a walking mass of contradictions. I click on the next page. He's still alone in all of these photos, and I remember Maury mentioning that she couldn't find any photos of him with a date, which prompted his gay question. Then on the third page, there is a picture of me with him at my graduation. His only photo with a woman, and that's me.

Holy cow! I'm on Google! I watch us together. I look surprised by the camera,

nervous, unbalanced. It was just before I agreed to try. For his part, Grayson looks incredibly handsome, calm, and composed, and he wears this tie. I look at him, one if

beautiful face, a beautiful face that could stare at Mrs. Damned MLF stifler's mom right now. I save the photo in my favorites and click on the eighteen screens... nothing. I won't find Ms. MLF stifler's mom on Google. But I need to know if he's with her. I type a quick email to Grayson.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Suitable dinner companions

Date: May 31, 2009 11:58 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Hope you and your friend had a very pleasant dinner.

Naddalin

PS Was it Mrs. MLF stifflers mom?

I hit send and hopelessly climb back into bed, determined to ask Grayson about his relationship with this woman. Part of me desperately wants to know more,

and another part wants to forget that he ever told me. And my period has started, so I have to remember to take my pill in the morning. I quickly program an alarm in my BlackBerry calendar. Putting it aside on the bedside table, I stretch out and finally drift into a worried sleep, wishing we were in the same town, within two thousand five hundred kilometers of each other.

After a morning of shopping and an afternoon back at the beach, my mom decreed that we should spend the evening in a bar. Ditching Bob on the TV, we find ourselves in the upscale bar at Savannah's most exclusive hotel. I am on my second Cosmopolitan. My mother is on her third. She offers more information on the fragile male ego. It is very disconcerting.

'See, Naddalin, men think anything that comes out of a woman's mouth is a problem to be solved. Not a vague idea that we would like to talk about for a while and then forget. Men prefer action. '

'Mom, why are you telling me this?' I ask, not hiding my exasperation. She's been like this all day.

'Honey, you seem so lost. You never brought a boy home. You never even

had a boyfriend when we were in Vegas. I thought something might develop with this guy you met in college, Sam.

'Mom, Sam is just a friend.'

'I know, honey. But there's something going on, and I don't think you're telling me everything.' She looks at me, her face filled with maternal concern.

'I just needed some distance from Grayson to get my thoughts clear… that's it.

He tends to overwhelm me. '

'Overwhelm?'

'Yeah. But I miss him.' I frown.

I haven't heard from Grayson all day. No email, nothing. I'm tempted to call him to see if he's okay. My worst fear is that he was in a car accident, my second biggest fear is that Ms. MLF stifler's mom will have her evil claws inside him again. I know it's irrational, but in what

Concerning her, I seem to have lost all sense of perspective.

'Honey, I have to visit the powder room.'

My mom's brief absence gives me another chance to check my BlackBerry. I have been surreptitiously trying to check emails all day. Finally - a response from Grayson!

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Dinner companions

Date: June 1, 2009, 9:40 p.m. EST

To: Naddalin Black

Yes, I had dinner with Mrs. MLF Stiffler's mom. She's just an old friend, Naddalin.

Hope to see you again. I miss you.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

He was dining with her. My scalp stings as the adrenaline and fury rush through my body, all my worst fears come true, rushing through me. How could he be away for two days, and he runs away to this nasty bitch.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: FORMER dinner companions

Date: June 1, 2009, 9:42 PM EST

To: Grayson Murray Ce

Is not just an old friend.

Did she find another teenager to get her teeth into?

Are you too old for her?

Is this the reason your relationship ended?

I press send on my mother's return.

'Naddalin, you are so pale. What happened?

I shake my head.

'Nothing. Let's have another drink,' I muttered quietly.

Her brow furrows, but she looks up and catches the attention of one of the waiters, gesturing to our glasses. He nods. He understands the universal language of 'same again, please. As she does, I take a glance at my BlackBerry.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Attention…

Date: June 1, 2009, 9:45 PM EST

To: Naddalin Black

This is not something I want to discuss via email.

How manyCosmopolites are you going to drink?

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Holy shit, he's here.

I look nervously around the bar but can't see it.

'Naddalin, what is it? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'It's Grayson, he's here.

'What really?' She also looks around the bar.

I neglected to mention Grayson's stalker tendencies to my mother.

I see him. My heart leaps, starting a jerky beat as it walks towards us. He's there - for me. My inner goddess jumped up, clapping from her lounge chair. Moving smoothly through the crowd, her hair reflects the burnished copper and red under the recessed halogens. Her bright gray eyes glow with - anger Tension Her mouth is set in a dark line, jaw strained. Oh, shit... no. I'm so mad at him right now, and here he is. How can I be mad at him in front of my mother?

He arrives at our table looking at me suspiciously. He is dressed in the usual white linen shirt and jeans.

'Hi,' I squeaked, unable to hide my shock and fear of seeing him here in the flesh.

'Hi,' he replies, and leaning in, kisses my cheek, taking me by surprise.

'Grayson, this is my mother, Carla. My ingrained ways take over.

He turns to greet my mother.

'Mrs. Adams, nice to meet you.'

How does he know his name? It gives her the breathtaking smile, patented

by Grayson Maury, full-fledged, no prisoner. She has no hope. My mother's lower jaw practically touches the table. Damn it, catch mom. She takes his outstretched hand and they shake. My mother did not respond. Oh, a completely stunning speechlessness is genetic - I had no idea.

'Grayson,' she finally understood, gasping for air.

He smiled knowingly at her, his gray eyes twinkling. I squint at them both.

'What are you doing here?' My question seems more fragile than what I mean, and his smile disappears, his expression now kept. Glad to see him, but completely off balance, my anger over Ms. MLF stifler's mom simmers in my veins. I don't know if I want to yell at him or throw myself in his arms - but I don't think he would like either - and I want to know how long he's been watching us. I'm also a little worried about the email I just sent him.

'I came to see you, of course.' He looks at me impassively. Oh, what is he thinking? 'I am staying at this hotel.'

'Are you staying here?' I sound like a sophomore on amphetamines, too high-pitched even for my ears.

'Well, yesterday you said you wished you were here.' He stops to try to gauge my reaction. 'We aim to please, Miss Black.' Her voice is calm without any trace of humor.

Damn - Is he angry? Maybe Ms. MLF stifler's mom is commenting? Or the fact that I'm on my third, soon-to-be fourth Cosmo. My mom is watching us worriedly.

'Don't you want to join us for a drink, Grayson?' She waves to the waiter who is by her side in a nanosecond.

'I'll have a gin and tonic,' said Grayson. 'Hendricks if you have it or Bombay Sap-phire. Cucumber with Hendricks, lime with Bombay.'

Damn... only Grayson could cook a meal by ordering a drink.

'And two more Cosmos please,' I add, looking at Grayson anxiously. I drink with my mom - he can't be mad about it.

'Please take a chair, Grayson.

'Thank you, Mrs. Adams.

Grayson pulls up a chair nearby and sits Billie fully next to me.

'So are you just staying at the hotel where we drink?' I ask, trying to keep my tone light.

'Or, you just happen to be drinking at the hotel I'm staying at,' Grayson replies.

'I just finished dinner, came here and saw you. I was thinking distracted about your most recent email, and I took a look, and there you are. Quite a coincidence, eh? He tilts his head to one side and I see a hint of a smile. Thank goodness we might be able to save the evening after all.

'My mom and I were shopping this morning and on the beach this afternoon. We opted for a few cocktails tonight, 'I mumble, feeling I owe him some sort of explanation.

'Did you buy this top?' He nods to my brand new green silk camisole, 'The color looks good on you. And you've sunk in. You look lovely.'

I blushed, speechless at his compliment.

'Well, I was going to visit you tomorrow. But there you are.

He reaches out, takes my hand, and squeezes it gently, running his thumb over my knuckles back and forth... and I feel the familiar pull. The electric charge zaps under my skin under the light pressure of his thumb, pulling into my bloodstream and pulsing around my body, heating everything in its path. It has been more than two days since I saw him.

Oh my... I want it. My breathing is blocked. I blink at him, smiling shyly, and see a smile play on his beautiful sculpted lips.

'I thought I would surprise you. But as always, Naddalin, you surprise me by being here.

I glance at mum who's looking at Grayson... yes who's watching! Stop it, mom. As if it were an exotic creature, never seen before. I mean, I know I've never had a boyfriend, and Grayson only qualifies as such for ease of reference - but is it so amazing that I can attract a man? This man

Yes, frankly - look at him - my subconscious slams. Oh shut up! Who invited you to the party, I frown at my mom - but she doesn't seem to notice.

'I don't want to interrupt your time with your mother. I'll have a drink and then retire. I have work to do, 'he says sincerely.

'Grayson, nice to finally meet you,' Mom intervenes, finally finding her voice.

'Naddalin has talked a lot about you.'

He smiles at her.

'Really?' He raises an eyebrow at me, an amused expression on his face, and I blush again.

The waiter arrives with our drinks.

'Hendricks, sir,' he said with a triumphant flourish.

'Thank you,' Grayson whispers in thanks.

I nervously sip my latest Cosmo.

'How long have you been in Georgia, Grayson?' Mom asks.

'Until Friday, Mrs. Adams.

'Would you like to have dinner with us tomorrow night, and please call me Carla.'

'I'd love to, Carla.

'Excellent. If you will excuse me, I have to visit the powder room.'

Mom... you just got it. I watch her desperately as she gets up and walks away, leaving us alone together.

'So you're mad at me for having dinner with an old friend.' Grayson turns his hot, suspicious gaze on me, bringing my hand to his lips and gently kissing each knuckle.

Damn, does he want to do this now?

'Yes,' I whisper as my heated blood rushes through me.

'Our sex was over a long time ago, Naddalin,' he whispers. 'I don't want anyone other than you. Haven't you understood that yet?

I blink at him.

'I consider her a pedophile, Grayson. I hold my breath waiting for his reaction.

Grayson bleached.

'It's very critical. It wasn't like that,' he whispers, shocked. He lets go of my hand. Judicial?

'Oh, how was it then?' I ask. The Cosmos makes me brave.

He frowns, bewildered. I continue.

'She took advantage of a vulnerable fifteen year old boy. If you had been a fifteen year old girl and Ms. MLF stifflers mom was a Mr. MLF stifflers mom, tempting you into a BDSM lifestyle, it would have been nice if it was Mia, say?'

He gasps and scowls at me.

'Naddalin, it wasn't like that.

I stare at him.

'Okay, I didn't feel like that,' he continues quietly. 'She was a force for good.

‘What I needed'

'I do not understand.' It's my turn to look puzzled.

'Naddalin, your mother will be back soon.' I'm not comfortable talking about it now. Maybe later. If you don't want me here, I have a plane waiting at Hilton Head.

I can go.

He's mad at me... no.

'No - don't go. Please. Glad you're here. I'm just trying to make it clear to you. I'm angry that as soon as I left you had dinner with her. Think about it. the way you are when I approach Sam. Sam is a good friend. I've never had sex with him. As you and her, 'I stop, unwilling to take that thought any further.

'You are jealous?' He looks at me, stunned, and his eyes soften slightly warming, 'Yes, and angry at what she did to you.'

'Naddalin, she helped me, that's all I'm going to say about it. And as for your jealousy, put yourself in my place. I haven't had to justify my actions to anyone for the past seven years.

Not a single person. I do what I want, Naddalin. I like my autonomy. I did not go to see Ms.

MLF stifler’s mom to get on your nerves. I went there because now and then we have dinner. She is a friend and a business partner. '

Business partner This is news.

He looks at me, assessing my expression.

'Yes, we are business partners. The sex is over between us. It's been years.'

'Why did your relationship end?'

Her mouth narrows and her eyes shine.

'Her husband found out.'

Holy shit!

'Can we talk about it another time - in a more private place?' he growls.

'I don't think you'll ever convince me that she's not some kind of pedophile.'

'I don't think of her that way. I never did. Now that's enough!' he slams.

'Did you like him?'

'How are you both doing?' My mother came back, invisible to either of us.

I put a fake smile on my face as Grayson and I lean back hastily... guiltily.

She's looking at me.

'Alright, mom.'

Grayson sips his drink, looking at me closely, his expression kept. What is he thinking? Did he love her? I think if he loved him I would lose him a lot.

'Well ladies, I'll leave you to your party.

No... no... he can't let me hang like that.

'Please put these drinks on my bill, room number 612. I'll call you tomorrow morning, Naddalin.' Until tomorrow, Carla.

'Oh, it's so nice to hear someone use your full name.'

'Beautiful name for a beautiful girl,' Grayson whispers, squeezing her outstretched hands, and she's simmering.

Oh mama, - and you Brute I stand up, looking at him, begging him to answer my question, and he kisses my cheek, chastely.

'See yeah, baby,' he whispers in my ear.’ Then he left.

Damn control-freak-bastard. My anger is coming back in force. I collapse in my chair and turn to face my mother.

'Well, hit me with a feather, Naddalin. It's a trap. I don't know what's going on between you two. I think you need to talk to each other. Phew - the UST here is unbearable. It is theatrically fanned.

'MOM!'

'Go talk to him.’

'I can't. I came here to see you.'

'Naddalin, you came here because you are confused about this boy. Obviously the two of you are crazy for each other. You need to talk to him. He just traveled three thousand kilometers to see you, for heaven's sake. And you know how horrible it is to steal. '

I rinse. I didn't tell him about his private plane.

'What?' She's making fun of me.

'He's got his own plane,' I mumble, embarrassed, and he's only two thousand five hundred miles, Mom.

Why am I embarrassed? His eyebrows are raised.

'Wow,' she mumbles. 'Naddalin, something is going on between you two. I've been trying to understand since you got here. But the only way to solve any problem is to discuss it with him. You can do whatever you want - but until you talk, you're not going to Pittsburgh where.

I frown at my mother.

'Naddalin, honey, you've always tended to over-analyze everything. Go with your instincts. What does that tell you, my darling?

I look at my fingers.

'I think I'm in love with him,' I mumble.

'I know honey. And he's with you.'

'No!'

'Yes, Naddalin. Hell - what do you need? A flashing neon sign on her forehead?'

I am speechless and tears sting the corner of my eyes.

'Naddalin, honey. Do not Cry.

'I don't think he likes me.'

'I don't care how rich you are, you don't drop everything and get on your private plane and cross a whole continent just for afternoon tea. Go see it! It's a beautiful place, very romantic. It is also neutral territory.

I squirm under his gaze. I want to go and no.

'Honey, don't feel like you have to come back with me. I want you to be happy - and right now I think the key to your happiness is upstairs in room 712. If you need to come back later, the key is under the Yucca plant on the porch. If you stay - well... you're a big girl now. Just be safe. '

I rinse the stars and red stripes. Damn it, mom.

'Let's finish our Cosmos first.'

'This is my daughter, Naddalin. She smiles.

I timidly knock on room 712 and wait. Grayson opens the door. He's in his cell. He blinks at me in total surprise, then holds the door wide open and gestures for me to enter his room.

'All the layoffs are over?… What about the cost?…' Grayson hisses between his teeth. 'Sheesh… that was a costly mistake… and Lucas…'

I take a look around the room. He's in a suit, like the Heathman. The furniture here is ultra-modern, very now. All muted dark purples and golds with bronze stars on the walls. Grayson walks over to the dark wood unit and opens a door to reveal a minibar. He indicates that I should help myself, then walks around the room.

I guess it's to stop hearing his conversation. I shrug my shoulders. He didn't stop his call when I walked into his office that time. I hear water running… he fills a bath. I use orange juice. He returns to the room.

'Ask Andrea to send me the diagrams. Barney said he solved the problem...'

Grayson laughs. 'No, Friday… There's a lot here I'm interested in… Yeah, ask Bill to call… No, tomorrow… I want to see what Georgia has to offer if we move in.'

Grayson doesn't take his eyes off me. Handing me a drink, he shows me an ice bucket.

'If their motives are attractive enough... I think we should give it some thought, although I'm not sure about the damn heat here... I agree that Detroit has its advantages too, and that's more. cool... 'His face darkened momentarily... Why 'Call Bill. Tomorrow... Not too soon.' He hangs up and looks at me, his face unreadable, and the silence stretches between us. Okay... My turn to speak.

'You didn't answer my question,' I whisper.

'No, I didn't,' he said softly, his gray eyes wide and cautious.

'No you didn't answer my question or didn't you like it?'

He crosses his arms and leans against the wall, and a small smile plays on his lips.

'What are you doing here, Naddalin?'

'I have just told you.'

He takes a deep breath.

'No, I didn't like him.' He frowns, amused but puzzled.

I can't believe I'm holding my breath. I collapse like an old cloth bag when I release it. Well, thank you heaven for that. How would I feel if he loved the witch?

'You're more of the green-eyed goddess, Naddalin. Who would have thought?

'Are you kidding me, Mr. Maury?'

'I would not dare.' He shakes his head solemnly, but he has a nasty glint in his eyes.

'Oh, I think you would, and I think you do - often.'

He smirked as I returned the words he had already said to me. His eyes darken.

'Please stop biting your lip. You're in my room, I haven't looked at you for almost three days, and I've come a long way to see you. Her tone became soft and sensual.

His BlackBerry is buzzing, distracting us both, and he turns it off without looking to see who it is. My breathing is blocked. I know where it's going... but we're supposed to talk.

He takes a step towards me with his sexy predatory look.

'I want you, Naddalin. Now. And you want me. This is why you are here.

'I really wanted to know,' I whisper in defense.

'Well, now that you do, are you coming or going?'

I blush as he stops in front of me.

'I'm coming,' I whisper, looking at him anxiously.

'Oh, I hope so.' He looks at me. 'You were so mad at me,' he hisses.

'Yes.'

'I can't remember anyone other than my family who was ever mad at me. I like it.'

He runs his fingers over my cheek. Oh my God, her closeness, her delicious Grayson smell. We're supposed to talk, but my heart beats hard, my blood sings as it runs through my body, desire, pooling, unfolding... everywhere. Grayson leans down and runs his nose down my shoulder and down to the base of my ear, his fingers crawling through my hair. I whisper.

'Later.'

'There are so many things I want to say.'

'Me too.'

He plants a soft kiss under my earlobe as his fingers tighten in my hair. Pulling my head back, he exposes my throat to his lips. His teeth brush my chin and he kisses my throat.

'I want you,' he hisses.

I moan and reach out and grab his arms.

'Are you bleeding? He continues to kiss me.

Holy shit. Does nothing escape him?

'Yes,' I whisper, embarrassed.

'Do you have cramps?

'No.' I rinse. Whore...

He stops and looks at me.

'Did you take your pill?'

'Yes.' How mortifying is that?

'Let's go take a bath.'

Oh?

He takes my hand and leads me into the bedroom. It is dominated by a super king-size bed with elaborate curtains. But we don't stop there. He takes me to the bathroom which is made up of two rooms, all aquamarine, and white limestone. It's huge - In the second room, a sunken tub, large enough for four with stone steps leading up to it, slowly fills with water. The

steam slowly rises above the foam and I notice a stone seat all around.

The candles twinkle on the side. Wow... he did it all over the phone.

'Do you have a hair tie?

I blink at him, dig into my jeans pocket, and pull off a hair elastic.

'Put your hair up,' he orders softly. I do what he asks.

It's hot and sultry next to the bath, and my tank top is starting to stick. He leans over and turns off the tap. Leading me back to the first part of the bathroom, he stands behind me as we face the wall mirror above the two glass sinks.

'Raise your arms,' he breathes. I do as I'm told, and he lifts my tank top over my head so that I'm topless standing in front of him. Without taking his eyes off mine, he reaches out and undoes the button on the top of my jeans and the zipper.

'I'll have you in the bathroom, Naddalin.'

Leaning down, he kisses me on the neck. I move my head to one side and give

it easier access. Hooking his thumbs into my jeans, he slowly slides them down my legs, digging behind me as he pulls them with my panties to the floor.

'Get out of your jeans.'

Grabbing the edge of the sink, that's exactly what I'm doing. I am now naked, looking at myself, and he is kneeling behind me. He kisses me and then gently bites my behind, making me gasp. He gets up and looks at me once more in the mirror. I try to stay still, ignoring my natural inclination to cover myself up. He plays his hand on my stomach, the span of his hand going almost from hip to hip.

'Look at you. You are so beautiful, 'he whispers. 'See how you feel.' He squeezes both of my hands in his, his palms against the backs of my hands, his fingers between mine so that my fingers are spread apart. He puts my hands on my stomach. 'Feel how soft your skin is.'

Her voice is soft and low. He moves my hands in a slow circle then upward towards my breasts. 'Feel how full your breasts are.' He holds my hands so that they take my breasts.

He gently strokes my nipples with his thumbs over and over again.

I moan between parted lips and arch my back so that my breasts fill my palms. He squeezes my nipples between our thumbs, pulling them gently so that they lengthen further. I watch with fascination the free creature writhing in front of me. Oh, that feels good. I moan and close my eyes, not wanting to see this lustful woman in the mirror collapse under her own hands... her hands... feel my skin like him, feel how hot she is - just his touch, and his calm, gentle, commanding.

'That's right, baby,' he whispers.

It guides my hands down the sides of my body, from my waist to my hips and through my pubic hair. He slides his leg between mine, spreading my feet further, widening my position, and running my hands over my cock, one hand at a time, in turn, establishing a rhythm. It's so erotic. I am a puppet and he is the master puppeteer.

'Watch yourself shine, Naddalin,' he whispered, dragging kisses and soft bites down my shoulder. I moan. Suddenly he lets go.

'Continue,' he orders, and pulls back, looking at me.

I rub myself. No, I want him to do it. It's not the same thing. I am lost without him. He pulls his shirt over his head and quickly takes off his jeans.

'Would you rather I do that?' His gray gaze burns mine in the mirror.

'Oh yes… please,' I breathe.

He wraps his arms around me again and takes my hands once more, continuing the sensual caress through my cock, over my clit. His chest hair rubs against me, his erection pressed against me. Oh soon... please. He bites the back of his neck and I close my eyes, enjoying the myriad sensations; my neck, my groin... the feel of him behind me.

He stops abruptly and spins me around, circling my wrists with one hand, trapping my hands behind me, and pulling on my Pittsburgh tail with the other. I'm close to him, and he kisses me wildly, ravaging my mouth with his. Holding me in place.

His breathing is irregular and matches mine.

'When did you start your period, Naddalin?' he asks suddenly, looking at me. 'Um… yesterday,' I mumbled in my very excited state.

'Good.' He frees me and turns me around.

'Hang on to the sink,' he orders and pulls my hips back again as he did in the playroom, so I lean over.

He stretches his hand between my legs and pulls on the blue string… what! And… gently pull out my tampon and throw it in the next toilet. Holy shit. Sweet mother of all… Fuck.

-And-

Then he is in me… ah! Skin to skin… moving slowly at first… easily, testing me, pushing me… oh my God. I clutch at the sink, panting, forcing myself back on him, feeling him inside me. Oh, the sweet agony… his hands squeeze my hips. He sets a punishing rhythm - in, out, and he reaches out and finds my clit, massaging me… oh jeez. I can feel myself speeding up.

'That's right, baby,' he squeaks as he rubs against me, tilting his hips, and that's enough to send me flying, flying high.

Whoa... and I come, loudly, clutching for Dear, life on the sink as I spiral down through my orgasm, everything spins and squeezes at once. He follows me, hugging me tight, front on my back as he cums and calls my name like it's a litany for a prayer.

'Oh, Naddalin! His breathing is irregular in my ear, in perfect synergy with mine. 'Oh, baby, will I ever get enough of you?' He whispers.

Will it always be like this? So overwhelming, so devouring, so confusing, and alluring. I wanted to talk, but now I'm exhausted and dizzy from his lovemaking and I wonder if I'll ever get enough of him.

We slowly fall to the floor, and he wraps his arms around me, trapping me. I'm curled up on his knees, my head against his chest, as we both calm down. Very subtly, I inhale its sweet and intoxicating Grayson scent. I must not muzzle. I must not muzzle. I repeat the mantra in my head - even though I am so tempted to do it. I want to raise my hand and draw patterns in his chest hair with my fingers... but I resist, knowing that he would hate it if I do. We are both quiet, lost in our thoughts. I am lost in him... lost for him.

I remember- I have my period.

'I'm bleeding,' I whisper.

'I don't mind,' he hisses.

'I noticed.' I can't help the dryness in my voice.

He tenses up slightly.

'Does it bother you?' He asks softly.

Does it bother me? Maybe it should... if not, it doesn't. I lean back and look at him, and he looks at me, his eyes a soft cloudy gray.

'Not at all.'

He smiles.

'Good. Let's take a bath.'

He unfolds around me, placing me on the floor as he stands. As he does so, I notice the little round white scars on his chest again. It's not chickenpox, I think distractedly. Billie said he was hardly affected. Holy shit... they must be burnt.

Burns of what I whitewash upon realization, shock, and repulsion coursing through me.

MLF stifler’s mom cigarettes, her birth mother, who did this to her Maybe there's a reasonable explanation, and I'm overreacting - a wild hope blooms in my chest - I hope I'm wrong.

'What is that?' Grayson's face is wide-eyed with alarm.

'Your scars,' I whisper. 'They are not chickenpox.'

I watch as in a split second he closes, his stance changing from relaxed, calm, and at ease, to defensive - angry, even. He frowns, his face darkens, and his mouth presses into a thin, hard line.

'No, they are not,' he snaps, but he does not elaborate further. He gets up, holds out his hand, and pulls me back to my feet.

'Do not look at me like that.' His voice is colder and rumbling as he lets go of my hand.

I blushed and chastised and stared at my fingers, and I know, I know someone smashed cigarettes on Grayson. I feel sick.

'Did she do that?' I whisper before I can stop.

He doesn't say anything, so I have to watch him. He looks at me.

'Her Mrs. MLF stifler’s mom It's not an animal, Naddalin. Of course, she didn't. I don't understand why you think you have to demonize her.

He's standing there, naked, gloriously naked, with my blood on him… and we finally have this conversation. And I'm naked too - neither of us has nowhere to hide except maybe the bath. I take a deep breath, walk past him, and descend into the water.

It is deliciously warm, soothing, and deep. I melt into the scented foam and watch it, hiding among the bubbles.

'I just wonder what you would be like if you hadn't met her. If she hadn't introduced you to your… uh, lifestyle.'

He sighs and goes down into the tub in front of me, his jaw clenched in

tension, his eyes frozen. As Billie fully submerged his body under the water, he was careful not to touch me. Jeez - did I drive him so crazy?

He stares at me impassively, his face unreadable, saying nothing. Again, silence stretches between us, but I take my advice. It's your turn Maury - I'm not giving in this time.

My subconscious is nervous, biting my nails anxiously - it could go either way. Grayson and I look at each other, but I don't back down. Finally, after what seems like a millennium, he shakes his head and smiles.

'I probably would have followed my birth mother's path, without Ms. MLF stifflers mom. '

Oh! I blink at him. Crack addict or whore Maybe both?

'She loved me in a way that I found... acceptable,' he adds with a shrug.

What the hell does that mean?

'Acceptable?' I whisper.

'Yes.' He stares at me. 'She distracted me from the destructive path I

found myself following. It's very difficult to grow up in a perfect family when you're not perfect.'

Oh no. My mouth is dry as I digest his words. He looks at me, his expression was, unfathomable. He won't tell me more. How frustrating. Inside I'm in shock - he seems so full of self-loathing. And Mrs. MLF stifler's mom loved him. Holy shit... is she still?

I feel like I've been kicked in the stomach.

'Does she still love you?'

'I don't think so, not like that.' He frowns as if he hadn't thought of the idea. 'I keep telling you that it was a long time ago. It's in the past. I couldn't change that even if I wanted to, which I don't do. She saved me from me. -even.' He is exasperated and runs a wet hand through his hair. 'I never discussed it with anyone.' He stops, 'Except Dr

LORENZO, of course. And the only reason I'm talking to you about this now is that I want you to trust me.

'I trust you, but I want to know you better, and every time I try to talk to you,

you distract me. There are so many things I want to know.'

'Oh please, Naddalin. What do you want to know, what should I do?' His eyes are shining, and although he doesn't raise his voice, I know he's trying to contain his temper.

I quickly look at my hands, clear under the water as the bubbles have started to disperse.

'I'm just trying to figure out, you're a puzzle. Unlike anyone, I have met before.

I'm glad you tell me what I want to know.

Damn - maybe it's the Cosmopolitans that make me brave, but suddenly I can't stand the distance between us. I move in the water beside him and lean against him so that we touch each other, skin to skin. He tensed up and looked at me suspiciously as if I might bite. Well, that's a turnaround. My inner goddess watches him in silent and surprised speculation.

'Please don't be mad at me,' I whisper.

'I'm not mad at you, Naddalin. I'm just not used to this kind of conversation - this investigation. I only have that with Dr. LORENZO and with -' He stops and frowns. eyebrows.

'With her. Mrs. MLF stifflers mom. Are you talking to her?' I invite him, trying to control my temper.

'Yes.'

'What about?'

He moves around the tub so he's facing me, causing the water to run sideways onto the floor. He puts his arm around my shoulders, resting on the edge of the tub.

'Persistent isn't it?' he whispers, a trace of irritation in his voice. 'Life, the universe - business. Naddalin, Mrs. R and I take a step back. We can discuss everything.'

'Me?' I whisper.

'Yes.' Gray eyes watch me intently.

I bite my lower lip, trying to stop the sudden surge of anger that arises.

'Why are you talking about me?' I try not to sound why and irritable, but I can't. I know I should stop. I push him too hard. My subconscious has its Edvard Munch face again.

'I've never met anyone like you, Naddalin.'

'What does this mean for someone who just didn't automatically sign your papers, no questions asked?'

He shakes his head.

'I need advice.'

'And you are taking Mrs. Paedo's advice?' I crack. The grip on my temper is more hesitant than I thought.

'Naddalin - enough,' he leans back severely, his eyes narrowing.

I skate on thin ice and head into danger. 'Or I'll put you on my knees.

I have no sexual or romantic interest in her. She is a Dear, and appreciated friend and business partner. That's all. We have a past, a shared history, which has been monumental for me, even

though it messed up her marriage - but that aspect of our relationship is over. '

Jeez - another part that I just can't figure out. She was also married. How did they get out of it for so long?

'And your parents never knew that?'

'No,' he growls. 'I told you.'

-And-

I know that's it. I can't ask him any more questions about her because he will lose her with me.

'Have you finished?' he slams.

'For the moment.'

He takes a deep breath and visibly relaxes in front of me as if a heavyweight is lifted off his shoulders or something.

'Good - my turn,' he mumbles, and his gaze turns to steel, speculative. 'You did not reply to my email.'

I rinse. Oh, I hate the spotlight on me, and it looks like he's going to get angry every time we have a discussion. I shake my head. Maybe that's what he thinks of my

questions, he's not used to being questioned. The thought is revealing, distracting, and bewildering.

'I was going to answer. But now you are here.

'Would you rather I wasn't?' he breathes, his expression impassive again.

'No, I'm happy,' I whisper.

'Good.' He gives me a sincere and relieved smile. 'I'm happy to be here too - despite your interrogation. So while it's okay to grill me, you think you can claim some sort of diplomatic immunity just because I stole this all the way for you. see. I'm not buying it, Miss Black. I want to know how you feel. '

Oh no…

'I told you. I'm glad you're here. Thanks for coming all this way,' I said weakly.

'It's my pleasure, Miss Black. His eyes shine as he leans in and kisses me softly.

I feel myself responding automatically. The water is still hot, the bathroom is still damp.

He stops and backs up, looking at me.

'No. I think I want some answers before I continue.'

More There is still this word. And he wants answers... answers that I don't have a secret past - I don't have a heartbreaking childhood. What could he want to know about me that he doesn't already know?

I sigh, resigned.

'What do you want to know?'

'Well, what do you think of our future arrangement, to begin with.'

I blink at him. Truth or dare time - my subconscious, inner goddess looks at herself nervously. Damn, let's go for the truth.

'I don't think I can do it for a long time. A whole weekend being someone I'm not.' I blush and look at my hands.

He lifts my chin, and he smiles at me, amused.

'No, I don't think you could either.'

-And-

Part of me feels slightly offended and challenged.

'Are you kidding me?'

'Yes, but in a good way,' he said with a small smile.

He leans in and kisses me softly, briefly.

'You're not a big submissive,' he breathes, holding my chin, his eyes dancing with humor.

I look at him in shock, then I burst out laughing - and he joins me.

'Maybe I don't have a good teacher.'

He sniffs the air.

'Maybe. Maybe I should be stricter with you.' He tilts his head to the side and gives me a shrewd smile.

I swallow. Damn it, no. But at the same time, my muscles are contracting deliciously deep inside.

It's his way of showing he cares. Maybe the only way he can show he cares - I realize that. He looks at me, gauges my reaction.

'Was it that bad when I spanked you the first time?'

I look at him, blinking my eyes. Was it so bad that I remember feeling confused by my reaction? It hurt, but not so much in retrospect. He said over and over again that it was more in my head. And the second time... well, it was good... hot.

'No, not really,' I whisper.

'Is that more the idea?' he invites.

'I guess. Feeling pleasure, when you're not supposed to.'

'I remember feeling the same. It takes time to understand.'

Good heavens. It was when he was a child.

'You can always be sure of yourself, Naddalin. Remember this. And, as

long as you follow the rules, which fulfill a deep need in me to be in control and to protect you, then maybe we can find a way forward.. '

'Why do you need to control me?'

'Because it fills a need in me that was not met in my formative years.'

'So is this a form of therapy?'

'I didn't think of it like that, but yeah, I guess it does.'

This is what I can understand. CA will help.

'But, here's the thing - one moment you say don't challenge me, the next you say you like to be challenged.

He looks at me for a moment, then frowns.

'I can see that. But you seem to be doing well so far.'

'But at what personal cost I am bound here.'

'I love that you are tied in knots, ' he smiles.

'That's not what i meant!' I splash her with exasperation.

He looks at me, arching an eyebrow.

'Did you just splash me?'

'Yes.' Holy shit... that look.

'Oh, Miss Black. He grabs me and pulls me onto his knees, spilling water on the floor. 'I think we've said enough about it yet.'

He squeezes his hands on either side of my head and kisses me. Deeply. Own my mouth. Tilting my head... controlling myself. I moaned against his lips. This is what he likes. That's what he's so good at. Everything's on fire inside of me and my fingers are in his hair, holding him against me, and I kiss him back and say I want you too, the only way I know-how. He moaned, moving me so that I straddled him, kneeling on him, his erection beneath me. He pulls back and looks at me, hooded eyes, shining and lustful. I drop my hands to grip the edge of the tub but he grabs both of my wrists and pulls my hands behind my back, holding them together in one hand.

'I'm going to have you now,' he whispers and lifts me to hover over him.

'Ready?' he breathes.

'Yes,' I whispered, and he walked over to him, slowly, deliciously slowly... filling me...

looking at me as he picked me up.

I moan as I close my eyes and revel in the feeling, the stretch of fullness. He flexes his hips, and I gasp, leaning forward, resting my forehead against his.

'Please let my hands go,' I whisper.

'Don't touch me,' he pleads, and releasing my wrists, he grabs my hips.

Gripping the rim of the tub, I move up and down slowly, opening my eyes to look at him. He looks at me. Her mouth opened slightly, her breathing stopped, stilted - her tongue between her teeth. He looks so... hot. We are wet and slippery and we move against each other. I lean in and kiss her. He closes his eyes. Tentatively, I bring my hands to her head and run my fingers through her hair, without removing my lips from her mouth. This is allowed. He likes that. I like this. And we move together.

I pull his hair back, tilt my head back and deepen the kiss, straddling him - faster, picking up the pace. I moaned against his mouth. He starts to lift me faster and faster... holding my hips. Kiss me back. We are wet mouth and tongue, tangled hair, and moving hips. any feeling... all-consuming again.

I'm close... I'm starting to recognize this delicious tightening... accelerator. And the water... it swirls around us, our whirlwind, a touching whirlpool as our movements become more frenetic... tossing around, mirroring what's going on inside me... and I don't care.

I love this man. I love his passion, the effect I have on him. I love that he flew so far to see me. I love that he cares about me... he cares. It's so unexpected, so fulfilling.

He is mine and I am his.

'That's right, baby,' he breathes.

-And-

I come, my orgasm tears me apart, a turbulent, passionate climax that devours me entirely. And suddenly Grayson crushes

me against him... his arms wrapped around my back as he finds his release.

'Naddalin, baby! he cries, and it's a wild invocation, stirring and touching the depths of my soul.

We are lying looking at each other, gray eyes in the blue, face to face, in the super king-size bed, both hugging our pillows to our foreheads. Naked. Do not touch. Just watch and admire, covered by the sheet.

'Do you want to sleep?' Grayson asks, his voice soft. He is handsome; the mix of colors in her lively hair against the white Egyptian cotton pillowcase, the gray, smoldering, expressive eyes. He looks worried.

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'No, I'm not tired.' I feel strangely energetic. It was so good to talk - I don't want to stop.

'What do you want to do?' He asks.

'Speak.'

He smiles.

'About what?'

'Thing.'

'What thing?'

'You.'

'And me?'

'What is your favorite movie?'

He smiles.

'Today is- 'The Piano.''

Her smile is contagious.

'Sure. Crazy about me. Such a sad and exciting score, which you can no doubt play. So many accomplishments, Mr. Maury.'

'And the biggest is you, Miss Black.'

'So I'm number seventeen.'

He frowns, not understanding.

'Seventeen?'

'Number of women you... have had sex with.'

Her lips curl up, her eyes shining in disbelief.

'Not exactly.'

'You said fifteen,' My confusion is obvious.

'I was referring to the number of women in my playroom. I thought that was what you meant. You didn't ask me how many women I had slept with.

'Oh.' Holy shit... there is more... how I am speechless. 'Vanilla?'

'No. You're my only vanilla conquest,' he shakes his head, still smiling at me.

Why does he find it funny and why am I smiling at him like an idiot?

'I can't give you a number. I didn't put any notches in the bed post or anything.'

'What are we talking about - tens, hundreds... thousands?' My eyes get crazier and crazier as the numbers go up.

'Dozens. We are in the tens, please.'

'All submissive?'

'Yes.'

'Stop smiling at myself,' I scolded him softly, trying and failing to keep a straight face.

'I can't. You're funny.'

'funny, strange or funny ha ha?'

'A bit of both I think.' His words reflect mine.

'That's a damn cheek, coming from you.'

He leans in and kisses the tip of my nose.

'This will shock you, Naddalin. Ready?'

I nod, my eyes wide, still with the stupid smile on my face.

'All submissive in training, when I was training. There are places in and around New York that you can go and practice. Learn how to do what I do,' he says.

What?

'Oh.' I blink at him.

'Yeah, I paid for sex, Naddalin.'

'There's nothing to be proud of,' I mumble haughtily. 'And you are right... I am deeply shocked. And I think I cannot shock you.'

'You were wearing my underwear.'

'Did that shock you?'

'Yes.' My inner goddess is pole vaulting over the fifteen-foot bar.

'You didn't wear your panties to meet my parents.'

'Did that shock you?

'Yes.'

Hell, the bar went down to sixteen feet.

'It looks like I can only shock you in the underwear department.'

'You told me you were a virgin. It's the biggest shock I've ever had.'

'Yes, your face was a picture, a Kodak moment.' I laugh.

'You let me work you with a riding crop.'

'Did that shock you?'

'Yeah.'

I smile.

'Well, I can let you do it again.'

'Oh, I hope so, Miss Black. This weekend?'

'Okay,' I agree, shyly.

'Okay?'

'Yes. I will return to the Red Pain Room.'

'You say my name.'

'Does that shock you?'

'The fact that I like it shocks me.'

'Grayson.'

He smiles.

'I want to do something tomorrow.' Her eyes shine with excitement.

'What?'

'A surprise. For you.' Her voice is low and soft.

I raise an eyebrow and stifle a yawn at the same time.

'Am I boring you, Miss Black?' His tone is Naddalindonic.

'Never.'

He leans in and kisses me softly on my lips.

'Sleep,' he orders, then turns off the light.

-And-

In that quiet moment, as I close my eyes, exhausted and full, I think I'm in the eye of the storm. And despite everything he said, and what he didn't say, I don't think I've ever been happier.

Grayson stands in a cage with steel bars. Dressed in his soft, ripped jeans, his chest and feet are bare to his mouth and he looks at me. His smile of private joke was etched on his handsome face and his gray eyes. In his hands, he holds a bowl of strawberries.

He walks with athletic Billie in the front of the cage, watching me intently. Holding a ripe, plump strawberry, he extends his hand through the bars.

'Eat,' he says, his tongue stroking the front of his palate as he utters the 'T'.

I try to walk towards him, but I am tied, held by an invisible force around my wrist, holding myself. Let me go.

'Come on, eat,' he said, smiling his delicious twisted smile.

I pull and pull... let me go! I feel like screaming and screaming, but no sound comes out. I'm dumb. It stretches a little more, and the strawberry is on my lips.

'Eat, Naddalin. Her mouth forms my name, sensually lingering over each syllable.

I open my mouth and bite, the cage disappears and my hands are free. I reach out to touch him, rubbing my fingers through his chest hair.

'Naddalin'.

No, I moan.

'Come on baby.'

No, I want to touch you.

'To wake up.'

No, please. My eyes involuntarily open for a split second. I'm in bed and someone is rubbing my ear.

'Wake up, baby,' he whispers, and the effect of his soft voice spreads like hot melted caramel through my veins.

It's Grayson. Damn, it's still dark, and the images of him from my dream linger, baffling and tantalizing in my head.

'Oh... no,' I moaned. I want to get back to his chest, back to my dream. Why is he waking me up?

It's the middle of the night, at least that's what it feels like. Holy shit. Does he want sex - now?

'It's time to get up, baby. I'll turn on the nightlight.' Her voice is calm.

'No,' I moan.

'I want to chase the dawn with you,' he says, kissing my face, my eyelids, the tip of my nose, my mouth, and I open my eyes. The night light is on. 'Hello pretty,'

He whispers.

I moan and he smiles.

'You are not early in the morning,' he whispers.

Through the haze of light, I squint and see Grayson leaning over me, smiling. Amused.

Amused by me. Dressed! In black.

'I thought you wanted sex,' I growl.

'Naddalin, I still want to have sex with you. It's heartwarming to know that you feel the same way,' he said dryly.

I watch him as my eyes adjust to the light, but he still looks amused... thank goodness.

'Of course it does, but not when it's so late.'

'It's not late, it's early. Come on, go ahead. We're going out. I'm going to do a sex rain test.'

'I was having such a beautiful dream,' I moan.

'Dream about what?' He asks patiently.

'You.' I'm blushing.

'What was I doing this time?'

'I'm trying to give myself strawberries.'

His lips quiver with a hint of a smile.

'Dr. LORENZO could spend a day in the field with that. Get up - get dressed. Don't bother to take a shower, we can do that later.'

We!

I sit up, and the sheet sinks to my waist, revealing my body. He gets up to make room for me, his eyes were dark.

'What time is it?'

'5:30 in the morning.'

'Looks like 3:01 in the morning'

'We don't have much time. I'll let you sleep as long as possible. Come on.'

'Can't I take a shower?'

He sighs.

'If you take a shower, I want one with you, and you and I know what's going to happen then - the day will be fine.' Come.

He's excited. As a little boy, he is iridescent with anticipation and excitement. It makes me smile.

'What are we doing?'

'It's a surprise. I told you.'

I can't help but smile at him.

'Okay.' I climb out of bed and search for my clothes. Of course, they are neatly folded on the chair next to my bed. He put on a pair of his jersey boxer shorts too, Jack Laurens, nothing less. I put them on and he smiles at me. Hmm, another Grayson Maury underwear - a trophy to add to my collection - with the car, the BlackBerry, the Mac, his black jacket, and a set of precious old original editions. I shake my head at her wideness and frown when a scene from Tess crosses my mind: the strawberry scene. It evokes my dream. To hell with Dr. LORENZO - Freud would have a field day - and then he would probably expire trying to deal with numerous Shadows.

'I'll give you some room now that you're on your feet.' Grayson walks out to the living room, and I walk around the bathroom. I need some occupancy, and I

want a quick wash. Seven minutes later, I'm in the living room, rubbed, brushed, and dressed in jeans, my camisole, heavens? Grayson Maury in underwear's Ah. Grayson looks up from the small dining table where he is having breakfast. Breakfast! Jeez, right now.

'Eat,' he said.

Saint Moses... my dream. I am speechless at the thought of his tongue on his palate. Hmm, his expert tongue.

'Naddalin,' he said sternly, pulling me out of my reverie.

It's too early for me. How do you deal with this?

'I'll have some tea. Can I have a croissant for later?'

He looks at me suspiciously and I smile very sweetly.

'Don't rain on my parade, Naddalin,' he warns softly.

'I'll eat later when my stomach is awake. Around 7:30 in the morning... okay?'

'Okay.' He looks at me.

Honestly. I have to concentrate so as not to make a face at him.

'I want to roll my eyes at you.'

'By all means, do, and you'll make my day,' he said sternly.

I look at the ceiling.

'Well, a spanking would wake me up, I guess.' I tighten my lips in silent contemplation. The mouth of Grayson opens.

'On the other hand, I don't want you all to be hot and messy, the climate here is pretty hot.' I shrug my shoulders nonchalantly.

Grayson shuts his mouth and tries very hard to appear unhappy, but desperately fails.

I can see the humor behind his eyes.

'You are, as always, a challenge, Miss Black. Drink your tea.

I notice the Twinings tag, and inside my heart is singing. See, he cares, my subconscious mouth is looking at me. I

sit down and face her, drinking her beauty. Will I ever get enough of this man?

As we leave the room, Grayson throws a sweatshirt at me.

'You will need it.'

I look at him, puzzled.

'Believe me.' He smiles, leans in, and kisses me quickly on the lips, then grabs my hand and we walk out.

Outside, in the relative coolness of the pre-dawn twilight, the valet hands Grayson a set of keys for a flash sports car with a soft top. I raise an eyebrow at Grayson, who smirks at me.

'You know, sometimes it's great to be me,' he said with a knowing but smug smile that I just can't help but emulate. He's so adorable when he's playful and carefree. He opens my car door with an exaggerated arc and I climb up. He's in such a good mood.

'Where are we going?'

'You will see.' He smiles as he starts the car and we head to Savannah Parkway. He programs the GPS and flips a

switch on the steering wheel and a classical orchestral piece fills the car.

'What is this?' I then ask that the soft and sweet sound of a hundred violin strings assail us.

'It's from La Traviata. An opera by Verdi.'

Oh, my... that's lovely.

'La Traviata, I've heard of it. I do not know where. What does that mean?

Grayson looks at me and smiles.

'Well, literally the woman got lost. It's based on Alexandre Dumas' book La Dame aux Camelias.'

'Ah. I read it.'

'I thought you could.'

'The doomed courtesan.' I squirm uncomfortably in the plush leather seat. Is he trying to tell me something 'Hmm, that's a depressing story,' I mumble?

'Too depressing Would you like to choose some music? It's on my iPod.' Grayson has that secret smile again.

I can't see his iPod in Pittsburgh where. He taps the console screen between us, and behold - there's a playlist.

'You choose.' Her lips twist into a smile, and I know it's a challenge. IPod's.

Grayson Maury, that should be interesting. I scroll the touchscreen and find the perfect song. I press play. I wouldn't have imagined it for a Britney fan. The club-mix, techno beat assails us both, and Grayson lowers the volume. Maybe it's too early for that: Britney is at her most sensual.

'Toxic, eh? Grayson smiles.

'I don't know what you mean.' I pretend innocent.

He turns the music down a little more and I hug myself. My inner goddess is standing on the podium waiting for her gold medal. He lowered the music.

Victory!

'I didn't put this song on my iPod,' he says casually, and puts his foot down so I am thrown back into my seat as the car speeds down the freeway.

What he knows what he's doing, the bastard. What has he done? And I have to listen to Britney over and over again. Who who?

The song ends and the iPod shuffles Damien Rice, sad. WhoWho I look out the window, my stomach rolls over.

Who?

'It was Leila,' he replies to my unspoken thoughts. How does he do that?

'Leila?

'An ex, who put the song on my iPod.'

Damien chirps in the background as I sit stunned. An ex... ex-submissive An ex - 'One of the fifteen?' I ask.

'Yes.'

'What happened to him?'

'We finished.'

'Why?'

Oh fuck. It is too early for this kind of conversation. But he seems relaxed, happy even, and talkative.

'She wanted more.' His voice is low, even introspective, and he leaves the sentence hanging between us, ending it again with that powerful little word.

'And you didn't?' I ask before I can use my brain-to-mouth filter. Damn, do I wanna know?

He shakes his head.

'I never wanted more, until I met you.'

I pant, staggering. Oh my. Isn't that what I want? He wants more. He wants it too! My inner goddess has returned to the podium and cartwheels around the stadium.

It's not just me.

'What happened to the other fourteen?' I ask.

Damn, he's talking - enjoy it.

'Do you want a divorced, beheaded, dead list?'

'You are not Henry VIII.

'Okay. In no particular order, I have only had long-term relationships with four women, other than Elena.'

'Elena?

'Mrs. MLF stifflers mom to you. He half-smiled his secret private joke smile.

Elena! Holy shit. The evil one has a name and its completely foreign sound. A vision of a glorious pale-skinned vampire with raven hair and ruby red lips comes to mind, and I know she is beautiful. I must not linger. I must not linger.

'What happened to the four?' I ask to distract myself.

'So curious, so hungry for information, Miss Black,' he scolds playfully.

'Oh, M. When is your period due?'

'Naddalin - a man needs to know these things.'

'Is he?'

'I do.'

'Why?'

'Because I don't want you to get pregnant.'

'Me neither! Well, not in a few years yet.'

Grayson blinks in surprise, then visibly relaxes. Okay. Grayson doesn't want kids.

Now or never, I am in shock at his sudden and unprecedented attack of candor. Maybe it's early in the morning Something in the Georgia water The Georgia air What else I want to know about Carpe Diem.

'So the other four, what happened?' I ask.

'One met someone else. The other three wanted - more. I haven't been in the market for longer.'

'And the others?' I support.

He looks at me briefly and just shakes his head.

'It did not work.'

Whoa, a lot of information to process. I look in the rearview mirror of the car and notice the gentle swell of pink and

aquamarine in the sky behind. Dawn follows us.

'Where are we going?' I ask, puzzled, looking at I-95. We're heading south, that's all I know.

'An airfield.'

'We're not going back to New York, are we?' I gasp, alarmed. I didn't say goodbye to my mom. She's fucking waiting for us for dinner.

He's laughing.

'No, Naddalin, we're going to indulge in my second favorite hobby.'

'Second?' I frown at him.

'Yeah. I told you my favorite this morning.'

I glance at his glorious profile, frowning, racking my brains.

'Indulging in you, Miss Black, that must be high on my list. I can have you anyway.'

Oh.

'Well, that's pretty high on my confusing and kinky priority list too.' I mumble, blushing, 'Glad to hear it,' he mumbles dryly.

'So, airfield?

He smiles at me.

'Outbreak.'

The term rings a vague bell. He already mentioned it.

'We're going to chase the dawn, Naddalin.' He turns and smiles at me as the GPS prompts him to turn right into what looks like an industrial complex. He stops in front of a large white building with a sign that says Brunswick Soaring Association.

Slippage! Are we going to get high?

He cuts the engine.

'Are you ready for this?' he asks.

'You fly?'

'Yes.'

'Yes please!' I do not hesitate. He smiles and leans forward and kisses me.

'Another first, Miss Black,' he said as he got out of the car.

Premiere: What sort of premiere? First time flying a glider... damn it! No - he said he already had. I am relaxing. He walks around and opens my door. The sky transformed into a subtle opal, sparkling and shining softly behind the sporadic and childish clouds. Dawn is upon us.

Taking my hand, Grayson walks me around the building to a large expanse of tarmac where several planes are parked. Waiting next to them is a shaven-headed, wild-looking man, accompanied by Stephen.

Stephen! Is Grayson going to Pittsburgh where without this man? I beam at him and he smiles sweetly at me.

'Mr. Maury, this is your tow pilot, Mr. Mark Hays, 'Stephen says. Grayson and Hays shake hands and strike up a conversation, which feels very technical about wind speed, directions, etc.

'Hello, Stephen,' I whisper timidly.

'Miss Black'. He nods at me and I frown. 'Naddalin,' he corrects himself.

'He's been hell on wheels the last few days. Glad we're here,' he said conspiratorially.

Oh, this is news - Why surely not because of me! Revelation Thursday! There must be something about the water in the savannah that allows these men to relax a bit.

'Naddalin,' Grayson summons me. 'Come.' He holds out his hand.

'See you later.' I smile at Stephen, and greeting me quickly, he heads back to the parking lot.

'Mr. Hays, this is my girlfriend Naddalin Black.'

'Nice to meet you,' I whisper as we shake hands.

Hays gives me a bright smile.

'Likewise,' he says, and I can tell by his accent that he's British.

As I take Grayson's hand, there is growing excitement in my stomach. Wow... high! We follow Mark Hays on the tarmac towards the runway. He and Grayson have an ongoing conversation. I understand the

essentials. We will be in a Blahnik L-23, which is better than the L-13, although that is up for debate. Hays will be piloting a Piper Pawnee. He's been flying taildraggers for about five years now. It doesn't mean anything to me, but looking at Grayson he's so lively, so in his element, it's a pleasure to watch him.

The plane itself is long, sleek, and white with orange stripes. It has a small cockpit with two seats facing each other. It is attached by a long white cable to a small conventional single-propeller aircraft. Hays opens the large transparent Perspex dome that frames the cockpit, allowing us to climb up.

'We need to tie up your parachute first.'

Parachute!

'I'll do this,' Grayson interrupts and removes the harness from Hays, who smiles friendly at him.

'I'm going to get some ballast,' Hays says and walks over to the plane.

'You like to tie me up in things.' I observe dryly.

'Miss Black, you have no idea. Here, get into the straps.'

I do as I'm told, placing my arm on his shoulder. Grayson stiffens slightly but doesn't move. Once my feet are in the buckles, he pulls up the parachute and I put my arms through the shoulder straps. Skillfully, he fastens the harness and tightens all the straps.

'There, you're going to make it,' he said softly, but his eyes were shining. 'Do you have your tie from yesterday?'

I agree.

'Do you want me to put my hair in the air?'

'Yes.'

I quickly do what I'm asked to do.

'Go ahead,' Grayson orders. He is still so bossy. I will ride in the back.

'No, in the front. The pilot is seated in the back.'

'But you won't be able to see.'

'I'll see a lot of them.' He smiles.

I don't think I've ever seen him so happy, bossy, but happy. I climb up, settling into the leather seat. It is surprisingly comfortable. Grayson bends down, pulls the harness over my shoulders, reaches between my legs for the lower waistband, and slit in the clip that rests against my stomach. It tightens all the retaining straps.

'Hmm, twice in one morning I'm a lucky man,' he whispers and kisses me quickly.

'It won't take long - twenty, thirty minutes at the most. The thermals aren't great this time of morning, but it's so mind blowing up there at this hour. Hope you're not nervous.'

'Excited.' I am beaming.

Where does that ridiculous smile come from? Part of me is terrified. My inner goddess - she's under a blanket behind the sofa.

'Good.' He smiles back at me, stroking my face, then disappears from view.

I hear and feel his movements as he climbs behind me. Of course, he tied me so tightly that I couldn't move around to see

him... typical! We are very low on the ground. In front of me are a panel of dials and levers and a big stick. I'm going alone.

Mark Hays appears with a cheerful smile as he checks my straps and leans in and checks the cockpit floor. I think it's the ballast.

'Yeah, sure. First time?' He asks me.

'Yes.'

'You'll love it.'

'Thank you, Mr. Hays.

'Call me Mark.' He turns to Grayson. 'Okay?'

'Yeah. Let's go.'

I'm so glad I didn't eat anything. I'm beyond excited and don't think my stomach would be a game for food, excitement, and getting off the ground. Once again, I place myself in the skillful hands of this handsome man. Mark closes the cockpit cover, walks over to the plane ahead, and climbs up.

The Piper's single propeller kicks in and my nervous stomach goes back to my

throat. Jeez... I do this. Slowly mark the taxis on the track, and as the cable picks up the tension, we suddenly rush forward. We're out. I hear chatter on the radio behind me. I think it's Mark talking to the tower - but I can't understand what he's saying.

As the Piper picks up speed, so do we. It's very bumpy, and in front of us, the single-propeller plane is still on the ground. Jeez, will we ever get up And suddenly my stomach goes out of my throat and falls freely through my body to the floor - we're in the air.

'Here we go, baby!' Grayson screams behind me. And we're in our bubble, just the two of us. All I hear is the sound of the wind and the distant hum of Piper's engine.

I grab the edge of my seat with both hands, so firmly my knuckles are white.

We head west, inland away from the rising sun, gaining height, crossing fields, woods, and houses, and I-95. Oh my. It's amazing, above us only the sky. The light is amazing, diffuse, and warm in hue, and I remember Sam walking around about

`` magic hour, ' a time of day photographers love - that's it... just after dawn, and I'm in it, with Grayson.

Suddenly, I remember Sam's show. Hmm. I have to tell Grayson. I wonder briefly how he will react. But I won't care, not now - I enjoy the ride. My ears jump as we gain height, and the ground slips farther and farther. It is so peaceful.

I fully understand why he likes being here. Far from his BlackBerry and all the pressures of his profession.

The radio crackles through life and Mark mentions 3000 feet. Jeez, that sounds high. I'm checking the field and can't see anything there anymore.

'Release,' Grayson says into the radio, and suddenly the Piper disappears, and the pulling sensation provided by the little plane ceases. We are floating, floating above Georgia.

Holy shit - this is exciting. The plane tilts and turns as the wing dives, and we head towards the sun. Icarus. That's it. I fly close to the sun, but he is with me, leading me. I gasp at the realization. We

are spiraling and spiraling and the view in this morning light is spectacular.

'Hold on!' he yells, and we dive in again - but this time he's not stopping. Suddenly I'm upside down, looking at the ground through the top of the cockpit canopy.

I squeal loudly, my arms automatically unleash, my hands spread over the Perspex to keep from falling. I can hear him laughing. Bastard! But his joy is contagious, and I also laugh as he straightens the plane.

'I'm glad I didn't have breakfast!' I yell at him.

'Yes, in hindsight, it's good that you didn't, because I'm going to start over.'

He plunges the plane again until we are upside down. This time, because I'm ready, I hang on to the harness, but it makes me smile and laugh like a fool. He levels the plane again.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' he calls.

'Yes.'

We fly, diving majestically in the air, listening to the wind and the silence, in the early morning light. Who could ask for more?

'Do you see the joystick in front of you?' he shouts again.

I watch the stick moving slightly between my legs. Oh no, where is he going with that?

'Catch.'

Oh shit. He's gonna make me fly the plane. No!

'Go ahead, Naddalin. Take it,' he urged more vehemently.

Tentatively I grab it and feel the pitch and yaw of what I guess are rudders and paddles or whatever it is that keeps this thing in the air.

'Hold on... keep it steady. See the middle dial in front. Keep the needle in neutral.' My heart is in my mouth. Holy shit. I fly a glider... I fly.

'Good girl.' Grayson seems delighted.

'I'm amazed that you let me take control,' I shouted.

'You would be amazed what I would let you do, Miss Black. Come back to me now.

I feel the joystick suddenly move, and I let go as we spiral down several meters, my ears starting to stick out again. The ground is getting closer and it looks like we could hit it shortly. Damn, this is scary.

'BMA, this is BG N Papa 3 Alpha, entering runway seven downwind to the left towards the grass, BMA.' Grayson sounds like his usual bossy self. The tower answers him by radio, but I don't understand what they are saying. We sail again in a wide circle, slowly sinking to the ground. I can see the airport, the airstrips and we come back over I-95.

'Wait, baby. It can get bumpy.'

After another circle, we dive, and suddenly we are on the ground with a brief kick, running along the grass - holy crap. My teeth chatter as we bump into the ground with alarming speed until we finally

come to a stop. The plane swings slightly then dives to the right.

I take a deep breath of air as Grayson leans over and opens the cockpit cover, climbing and stretching.

'How was it?' he asks, and his eyes are a shiny, dazzling silvery gray. He leans in to unbuckle me.

'It was amazing. Thank you,' I whisper.

'Was that more?' he asks, his voice tinged with hope.

'Much more,' I breathe, and he smiles.

'Come.' He holds out his hand and I climb out of the cockpit.

As soon as I get out he grabs me and holds me against his body. Suddenly his hand is in my hair, pulling it so that my head tilts back, and his other hand goes down to the base of my spine. He kisses me, long, hard, and passionately, his tongue in my mouth.

His breathing rises, his ardor... Holy cow - his erection... we are in a field.

But I don't care. My hands twist in his hair, staring at him. I want it, here, now, on the ground. He pulls away and looks at me, his eyes now dark and bright in the early morning light, full of raw, arrogant sensuality. Wow. It takes my breath away.

'Breakfast,' he murmurs, making it deliciously erotic.

How do you make bacon and eggs sound like a broken fruit? It is an extraordinary skill. He turns around, clasping my hand, and we head back to the car.

'What about the glider?'

'Will someone takes care of this?' He said disdainfully. 'We're going to eat now. His tone is unequivocal.

Food! He talks about food when all I want is him.

'Come.' He smiles. I've never seen him like this, and it's a joy to see. I find myself walking beside him, hand in hand, with a silly, goofy smile on my face. It reminds me of when I was ten and spent the day at Disneyland with Ray. It was a perfect day, and it is sure to look like it.

Back in the car, as we head back onto I-95 towards Savannah, my phone alarm goes off. Oh yes... my pill.

'What is that?' Grayson asks, curious, looking at me.

I dig in my purse for the package.

'Alarm for my pill,' I mumble as my cheeks flush.

His lips are raised.

'Good, well done. I hate condoms.'

I hunt a little more. He's as condescending as ever.

'I love that you introduced me to Mark as your girlfriend,' I whisper.

'Isn't that what you are?' He raises an eyebrow.

'I think you wanted a submissive.'

'Me too, Naddalin, and me too. But I told you, I want more too.'

Oh my. He comes back, and hope springs in me, leaving me breathless.

'I'm very happy that you want more,' I whisper.

'We aim to please, Miss Black.' He smirks as we enter the International House of Pancakes.

'I JUMP.' I smile back at him. I do not believe it. Who would have thought... Grayson Maury at IHOP.

It is 8:30 am but calm in the restaurant. It smells of sweet dough, frying, and disinfectant. Hmm... not such a seductive aroma. Grayson takes me to a booth.

'I never would have imagined you here,' I said, sliding us into a booth.

'My dad used to bring us to one of them every time my mom left for a medical conference. It was our secret.' He smiles at me, gray eyes dancing, then picks up a menu, running a hand through his unruly hair as he looks at it.

Oh, I want to run my hands through this hair. I take a menu and examine it. I realize that I am starving.

'I know what I want,' he hisses, his voice low and hoarse.

I look at him, and he looks at me in that way that tightens every muscle in my

stomach and takes my breath away, his eyes dark and smoking. Holy shit. I watch him, my blood singing in my veins responding to his call.

'I want what you want,' I whisper.

He inhales sharply.

'Here?' he asks suggestively, raising an eyebrow at me, grinning nastily, his teeth catching the tip of his tongue.

Oh my... sex in IHOP. His expression changes darken.

'Don't bite your lip,' he orders. 'Not here, not now.' His eyes harden momentarily, and for a moment he looks so deliciously dangerous. 'If I can't have you here, don't tempt me.' 'Hi, my name is Leandra, what can I get you... uh... people... uh... today, this morning...?' Her voice trailed off, stumbling over her words as she had one eye full of Mr.

Beautiful in front of me. She blushes scarlet, and a tiny hint of sympathy for his unwelcome bubbles in my consciousness because he always does this to me. His presence allows me to briefly escape his sensual gaze.

'Naddalin? he invites me over, ignoring him, and I don't think anyone can instill as much charity in my name as they did then.

I swallow, praying that I'm not the same color as poor Leandra.

'I told you, I want what you want.' I keep my voice soft, low, and he looks at me eagerly. Damn, my inner goddess was swooning. Am I up to this game?

Leandra looks from me to him and vice versa. She is practically the same color as her shiny red hair.

'Should I give you one more minute to decide?'

'No. We know what we want.' Grayson's mouth twists with a sexy little smile.

'We will have two servings of the original buttermilk pancakes with maple syrup and bacon on the side, two glasses of orange juice, a black coffee with skim milk and an English tea for breakfast, if you do, 'Grayson said, not taking his eyes off me.

'Thank you sir. Will that be all?' Leandra whispers, looking at Pittsburgh

where but the two of us. We both turn to look at her, and she blushes purple again and walks away.

'You know it's really not fair.' I look at the Formica tabletop, tracing a pattern on it with my index finger, trying to sound nonchalant.

'What is not right?'

'How do you disarm people? Women. Me.'

'Am I disturbing you?'

I sniffled.

'All the time.'

'It's just appearance, Naddalin,' he said softly.

'No, Grayson, it's more than that.'

His forehead creases.

'You disarms me, Miss Black. Your innocence. It cuts all the crap.

'Is that why you changed your mind?'

'Change of opinion?'

'Yeah - about... uh... us?'

He thoughtfully strokes her chin with his long, skillful fingers.

'I don't think I've changed my mind per se. We just need to redefine our settings, redefine our battle lines, if you want. We can do that job, I'm sure. game. I'll punish you if you deviate from the rules. Other than that... well, I think it's all up for discussion. These are my demands, Miss Black. What do you say about this? '

'So am I going to sleep with you in your bed?'

'Is this what you want?'

'Yes.'

'I agree then. Besides, I sleep very well when you're in my bed. I had no idea.' His forehead creases as his voice fade.

'I was afraid you would leave me if I didn't accept all of this,' I whisper.

'I'm not going to Pittsburgh where Naddalin. Besides...' He pauses, and after some thought, he adds. 'We are taking your advice, your definition: compromise. You

emailed it to me. And so far it's working for me.'

'Love that you want more,' I whisper shyly.

'I know.'

'How do you know?'

'Trust me. I just do.' He gives me a smirk. He's hiding something. What?

At this point, Leandra arrives with breakfast and our conversation ends. My stomach rumbles, reminding me of how voracious I am. Grayson watches with boring approval as I devour everything on my plate.

'May I treat you?' I ask Grayson.

'Treat me how?'

'Pay for this meal.'

Grayson sniffles.

'I do not think so.' he mocks.

'Please. I want to.'

He frowns.

'Are you trying to completely emulate me?'

'It's probably the only place I can afford to pay.'

'Naddalin, I appreciate the thought. Yes. But no.'

I tighten my lips.

'Don't frown,' he threatens, his eyes shining ominously.

Of course, he doesn't ask me for my mother's address. He already knows it, stalker, that he is. When he stops outside the house, I don't comment. What's the point?

'Do you want to come in?' I ask shyly.

'I need to work, Naddalin, but I'll be back tonight. At what time?

I ignore the stroke of unwanted disappointment. Why do I want to spend every minute with this controlling sex god? Oh yeah, I fell in love with him, and he can fly.

'Thanks... for the most.'

'My pleasure, Naddalin. He kisses me and I breathe in his sexy Grayson scent.

'I will see you later.'

'Try to stop me,' he whispers.

I say goodbye to him as he flees to sunny Georgia. I'm still wearing his sweatshirt and his underwear, and I'm too hot.

In the kitchen, my mom is in complete shambles. It's not every day that she has to entertain a multi-billionaire, and it stresses her out.

'How are you honey?' she asks, and I blush because she must know what I was doing last night.

'I'm fine. Grayson took me on a glider this morning.' I hope the new information will distract her.

'Flying like in a small plane without an engine, what kind of gliding?'

I agree.

'Wow.'

She is speechless - a new concept for my mother. She's speechless, but

eventually recovers to herself and resumes her initial line of questioning.

'How was last night, did you speak?'

Jeez. I rinse off the brilliant scarlet.

'We talked - last night and today. It's getting better.'

'Good.' She returns her attention to the four cookbooks she has opened on the kitchen table.

'Mom... if you want, I'll cook tonight.'

'Oh honey, that's nice of you, but I want to do it.'

'Okay.' I grimace, knowing full well that my mother's cooking is rather haphazard.

Maybe she's improved since she moved to Savannah with Bob. There was a time when I didn't subject anyone to her kitchen... even - who do I hate Oh yes - Ms. MLF stifler’s mom- Elena. Well, maybe she. Will I ever meet this damn woman?

I decided to send a quick thank you to Grayson.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Flight rather than painful

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:20 am. EST

To: Grayson Maury

Sometimes you know how to show a girl a good time.

Thank you

Naddalin x

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Flare vs. painful

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:24 am. EST

To: Naddalin Black

I'll take one of these two on your snoring. I had a great time too.

But I always do when I'm with you.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: SNORING

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:26 am. EST

To: Grayson Maury

I DO NOT SNORE. And if I do, it is very sassy of you to point it out.

You are not a gentleman, Mr. Maury! And you are also in the Great South!

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Somniloquy

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:28 am. EST

To: Naddalin Black

I never pretended to be a gentleman, Naddalin, and I think I've made this point to you many times. I am not intimidated by your SHOUTY capitals. But I'll admit a little white lie: no - you don't snore, but you talk. And it is fascinating.

What happened to my kiss?

Grayson Murray

Cad and CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Holy shit. I know I speak in my sleep. Maury has told me enough times. What did I say? Oh no.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Spill the Beans

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:32 EST

To: Grayson Maury

You are a caddy and a scoundrel - certainly not a gentleman.

So what did I say? No kisses for you until you speak!

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Sleeping Beauty

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:35 am. EST

To: Naddalin Black

It would be very sassy of me to say that, and I have been reprimanded for it before.

But if you behave, I can tell you tonight. I have to go to a meeting now.

(see yeah, baby.)

15

Grayson Murray

CEO, Cad & Scoundrel, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. This is true! I will maintain radio silence until tonight. I smoke. Jeez. Suppose I say I hate him, or worse yet, love him, in my sleep. Oh, I hope not. I'm not ready to tell him that, and I'm sure he's not ready to hear it if he ever wants to hear it. I frown at my computer and decide that whatever I'm cooking I'm going to bake.

My mom opted for gazpacho soup and a barbecue with olive oil, garlic, and lemon marinated steaks. Grayson loves meat and it's easy to make. Bob volunteered to take care of the barbecue. What is it between men and fire, I reflect as I stalk my mother through the supermarket with the shopping cart?

As we walk through the raw meat cabinet, my phone rings. I jostle, thinking maybe it's Grayson. I don't recognize the number.

'Hello?' I answer breathlessly.

'Naddalin Black?

'Yes.'

'This is Elizabeth Morgan from SIP.'

'Oh hi.'

'I'm calling to offer you the position of assistant to Mr. Jack Hyde. We would like you to start on Monday.'

'Wow. That's great. Thanks!'

'Do you know the salary details?'

'Yes. Yes... that's - I mean, I take your offer. I would love to come and work for you.'

'Excellent. See you Monday at 8:30 am?'

'See you soon. Goodbye. And thank you.'

I shine towards my mother.

'You have a job?'

I nod happily, and she whines and hugs me in the middle of the Publix supermarket.

'Congratulations, honey! We have to buy champagne!' She claps her hands

and jumps up and down. Is she forty-two or twelve?

I look at my phone and frown, there's a missed call from Grayson. He never calls me. I'll call him back right away.

'Naddalin,' he replies immediately.

'Hi,' I whisper timidly.

'I have to go back to New York. Something has happened. I'm on my way to Hilton Head now. Please apologize to your mother - I can't cook dinner. He looks very professional.

'Nothing serious I hope?'

'I have a situation I have to deal with. I'll see you on Friday. I'll send Stephen to pick you up from the airport if I can't come by myself.' He looks cold. Angry even. But for the first time, I don't immediately think it's me.

'Okay. I hope you get your situation sorted out. Have a safe flight.'

'You too, baby,' he breathes, and with those words, my Grayson is back briefly. Then he hangs up.

Oh no. The last 'situation' he had was my virginity. Damn, I hope that's not it.

I look at my mother. His previous jubilation turned into worry.

'It's Grayson, he had to go back to New York. He apologizes.'

'Oh! It's too bad, honey. We can still barbecue, and now we have something to celebrate - your new job! You have to tell me all about it.'

It's late afternoon, and mom and I are lying by the pool. My mom has relaxed to the point where she's horizontal now that Mr. Megabucks isn't coming to dinner. As I lie in the sun, trying to lose my paleness, I think about last night and today's breakfast. I think of Grayson and my ridiculous smile refuses to subside. It keeps crossing my face, spontaneously and bewildered, as I remember our different conversations and what we did... what he did.

There seems to be a tidal shift in Grayson's attitude. He denies it but - he admits he's trying to do more. What could have changed? What has changed since he sent his long email and when I saw him

yesterday? What did he do? He had dinner with… her. Elena.

Holy shit!

My scalp stings at the realization. She said something to him, Oh… for being a fly on the wall during their dinner. I could have landed in her soup or on her glass of wine and choked her.

'What's the matter, Naddalin, honey?' Mom asks, surprised at her torpor.

'I'm just spending a moment, mom. What time is it?'

'Around 6:30 p.m, honey.'

Hmm... it won't have landed yet. Can I ask her if I ask her or maybe she has nothing to do with it? I very much hope so. What I said in my sleep shit... unattended remark dreaming about him. I bet anything, or was, I hope the sea of change is from him and not because of her.

I am suffocating in this damn heat. I need another dip in the pool.

As I get ready for bed, I turn on my computer. I haven't heard from Grayson.

Not even a word that it arrived safe and sound.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Safe arrival?

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:32 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Sir

Please let me know that you have arrived safe and sound. I'm starting to worry. Thinking of you.

Your Naddalin. x

Three minutes later, I hear my email inbox pinging.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Sorry

Date: Jun 2, 2009, 7:36 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

I arrived safe and sound, and please accept my apologies for not letting you know. I don't want to worry you, it's

heartwarming to know that you care about me. I think of you too and I always look forward to seeing you tomorrow.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I sigh, Grayson is back to formality.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: The situation

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:40 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

I think it is very obvious that I care deeply about you. How can you doubt it?

I hope your 'situation' is in hand.

Your Naddalin x

PS: Are you going to tell me what I said in my sleep?

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Advocacy for the fifth

Date: Jun 2, 2009, 7:45 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black,

I like the fact that you care about me. The 'situation' here is not yet resolved.

Regarding your PS: The answer is - No.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Pleading for Madness

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:48 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Hope it was fun. But know that I cannot accept any responsibility for what comes out of my mouth when I am unconscious. You probably misunderstood me.

A man in your late years is surely a little deaf.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Guilty, please

Date: Jun 2, 2009, 7:52 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

Sorry, could you speak, I can't hear you.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Please Madness Again

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:54 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

You are driving me crazy you're even in my head always.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: I hope so...

Date: June 2, 2009 7:59 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

I plan to do just that on Friday night. Waiting.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Grrrrrr

Date: June 2, 2009, 11:02 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

I am officially angry with you.

Good evening.

Miss Black

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Wild Cat

Date: Jun 2, 2009, 8:05 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Are you grumbling at me at Miss Black?

I have my cat for growlers.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I have never seen a cat in her apartment. No, I'm not going to answer him.

Oh, he can be so maddening sometimes. numerous Shadows of Exasperation. I climb into bed and lie down staring at the ceiling as my eyes adjust to the darkness. I hear another ping from my computer. I'm not going to watch. Not. No, I'm not going to watch. Gah!

Like the fool that I am, I can't resist the allure of Grayson Maury's words.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: What you said in your sleep...

Date: Jun 2, 2009, 8:20 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Naddalin

I'd rather hear you say the words you said in your sleep when you are conscious, which is why I won. I am not telling you. Go to bed. You will need to rest with what I have in mind for you tomorrow.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Oh no... what did I say? It's as bad as I think I'm sure.

My mother hugs me tight.

'Follow your heart, honey, and please, please - try not to overthink it. Relax and have fun. You are so young, honey. life to live, let it happen. You deserve the best of everything. ' His heartfelt words are heartwarming whispered in my ear. She kisses my hair.

'Oh mom.' Hot, unwelcome tears sting my eyes as I cling to her.

'Honey, you know what they say. You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince.'

I give him an unbalanced, bittersweet smile.

'I think I kissed a prince, mom. Hope he doesn't turn into a frog.

She gives me her most Daring smile of love, motherly, absolute,

unconditional, and I marvel at the love I feel for this woman as we kiss again.

'Naddalin - they're calling your flight,' Bob's voice is anxious.

'Would you like to visit, mom?'

'Of course honey - soon. I love you.'

'Me too.'

Her eyes are red with unshed tears as she releases me. I hate leaving her. I hug Bob and turn around, head for the door - I don't have time for the first class lounge today. I do not want to look back. But I do... and Bob holds my mother, and tears flow on his face. I can't hold mine anymore. I lowered my head and made my way to the portal, keeping my eyes on the shiny white floor, blurred through my tearful tears.

Once onboard, in the luxury of first-class, I curl up in my seat and try to calm myself down. It's always painful to get away from mom... She's disgusting, disorganized, but newly insightful, and she loves me. Unconditional love - what every child deserves from their parents. I frown at my whimsical thoughts and pull out my BlackBerry, staring despondently.

What does Grayson know about love? It seems he didn't have the unconditional love he was entitled to during his very early years. My heart twists and my mother's words float like a zephyr through my mind: Yes, Naddalin. Hell - what do you need - a flashing neon sign on his forehead. She thinks Grayson loves me, but then it's my mom, of course, she would. She thinks I deserve the best of everything. I frown. That's right, and in a moment of surprising clarity, I see it. It's very simple: I want his love. I need Grayson Maury to love me.

This is why I am so reluctant about our relationship - because, at a fundamental and fundamental level, I recognize within myself a deep compulsion to be loved and cherished.

-And-

Because of its numerous Shadows - I hold back. BDSM is a distraction from the real problem. The sex is amazing, he's rich, he's beautiful, but it all makes no sense without his love, and the real failure is I don't know if he's capable of loving. He doesn't even love himself. I remember his self-hatred, his love is the only form he found - acceptable. Punished - whipped, beaten, whatever the relationship their

relationship involves - he feels unworthy of love. Why does he feel like this? How can he feel like this? His words haunt me: `` It's very difficult to grow up in a perfect family when you're not perfect. ''

I close my eyes, imagining her pain, and I can't begin to understand it. I shudder remembering that I may have divulged too much. What did I confess to Grayson in my sleep? What secrets did I reveal?

I stare at the BlackBerry in the vague hope that it will give me answers. Unsurprisingly, it's not very soon. As we haven't taken off yet, I decided to send my numerous Shadows by email.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Coming home

Date: June 3, 2009, 12:53 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

I am once again installed in first class, for which I thank you. I'm counting the minutes until I see you tonight, and

maybe I'm torturing you the truth about my nightly confession.

Your Naddalin x

From: Grayson Maury

Subject:

Return

Home Date: Jun 3, 2009, 9:58 a.m.
To: Naddalin Black

Naddalin, I can't wait to see you.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

His answer makes me frown. It looks cut and formal, not his usual witty, concise style.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Coming home

Date: June 3, 2009, 1:01 PM EST

To: Grayson Murray Very

Dear, Mr. Maury

I hope all is well in 'the situation'. The tone of your email is disturbing.

Naddalin x

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Coming home

Date: Jun 3, 2009 10:04 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Naddalin

The situation could be better. Have you ever taken off? If so, you shouldn't send an email.

You put yourself in danger, in direct violation of the rule relating to your safety. I wanted to say what I said about the punishments.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Shit. Okay. Jeez. What gnaws at him? Maybe the situation Maybe Stephen left AWOL, maybe he lost a few million on the stock market - whatever the reason.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Excessive reaction

Date: June 3, 2009, 1:06 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Grumpy

The doors of the plane are always open. We are late, but only ten minutes. My well-being and that of the passengers around me are guaranteed. You can put away your nervous palm for the time being.

Miss Black

From: Grayson Maury

Thread: Apologies - Twitchy Palm Stowed

Date: Jun 3, 2009 10:08 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

I miss you and your smart mouth Miss Black.

I want you home safe.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Apologies accepted

Date: June 3, 2009, 1:10 p.m. EST

To: Grayson Maury

They close the doors. You won't hear another glance from me, especially given your deafness.

see yeah.

Naddalin x

I turn off the BlackBerry, unable to shake off my anxiety. Something's wrong with Grayson.

Maybe 'the situation is out of control. I sit up, looking up at the locker where my bags are stored. I got this done this morning, with my help from his mother, to buy Grayson a little gift to thank you for the first class and the gliding. I smile at the memory of the flight -

It was something else. I don't know yet if I'm going to give him a silly gift. He might think it's childish - and if he's in a weird mood, maybe not. I can't wait to come back and I'm afraid of what to expect at the end of my trip. As I mentally flip

through all the scenarios that could be 'the situation, I realize that once again, the only empty seat is next to me. I shake my head as the thought crosses my mind that Grayson may have bought the adjacent seat so I can't talk to anyone. I dismiss the idea as ridiculous - no one can be so controlling, so jealous, surely. I closed my eyes as the plane taxied to the runway.

I emerge into the Sea-Tac arrivals terminal eight hours later to find Stephen waiting and holding up a sign that reads Miss A Black. Honestly! But it's good to see it.

'Hello, Stephen.'

'Miss Black,' he greets me formally, but I see a hint of a smile in his sharp brown eyes.

He looks like his usual crisp charcoal suit, white shirt, and charcoal tie.

'I know what you look like Stephen, you don't need a board, and I would like you to call me, Naddalin.'

'Naddalin. Can I take your bags, please?'

'No, I can do it. Thank you.'

Her lips tighten noticeably.

'But, if you're more comfortable taking them,' I stutter.

'Thank you.' He grabs my newly acquired backpack and wheeled case for the clothes my mom bought me. 'Over here, ma'am.'

I sigh. He's so polite. I remember, although I would like to erase it from my memory, that this man bought me underwear. In fact - and the thought disturbs me - he's the only man who's ever bought me underwear. Even Ray never had to endure this ordeal.

We walk silently towards the black Audi SUV outside in the airport parking lot, and he holds the door open for me. I climb up, wondering if wearing such a short skirt for the return trip to New York was a good idea. It was cool and welcome to Georgia. Here, I feel exposed. Once Stephen had put my suitcases in the trunk, we left for Escala.

The journey is slow, caught in rush hour traffic. Stephen keeps his eyes on the road ahead. Taciturn does not begin to describe it.

I can't stand the silence anymore.

'How's Grayson doing, Stephen?'

'Mr. Maury is concerned, Miss Black.

Oh, that must be 'the situation'. I am mining a vein of gold.

'Concerned?'

'Yes ma'am.'

I frown at Stephen, and he looks at me in the rearview mirror, our eyes meet. He didn't say anything more. Damn, he can be as low-key as the control freak himself.

'Is he okay?'

'I believe so, ma'am.'

'Are you more comfortable calling me, Miss Black?'

'Yes ma'am.'

'Oh okay.'

Well, that ends our conversation and we continue in silence. I started to think Stephen's recent slip when he told me Grayson had been hell on wheels, was an anomaly. Perhaps he is embarrassed,

worried that he has been disloyal. The silence is suffocating.

'Could you please put on some music?'

'Certainly, ma'am. What would you like to hear?'

'Something soothing.

I see a smile play on Stephen's lips as our eyes meet again briefly in the mirror.

'Yes ma'am.'

He pushes a few buttons on the steering wheel, and the gentle tension of Pachelbel's canon fills the space between us. Oh yeah... that's what I need.

'Thank you.' I sit down as we drive slowly but steadily along I-5 into New York City.

Twenty-five minutes later, he drops me off in front of the impressive facade which is the entrance to Escala.

'Go ahead, ma'am,' he said, holding the door open for me. 'I'll bring your bags.' Its expression is soft, warm, even avuncular.

Fuck... Uncle Stephen, what a thought.

'Thanks for meeting me.'

'It's a pleasure, Miss Black.' He smiles and I walk towards the building. The porter nods and waves his hand.

As I climb to the thirtieth floor, a thousand butterflies stretch their wings and float erratically in my stomach. Why am I so nervous? And I know it's because I have no idea what Grayson's mood was when I arrived. My inner goddess is hoping for a type of mood, my subconscious, like me, is full of nerves.

The elevator doors open and I'm in the lobby. It's so strange not to be met by Stephen.

Of course, he parks the car. In the Great Room, Grayson is on his BlackBerry, talking quietly as he gazes through the glass doors at the New York City skyline in the early evening. He wears a gray suit with the jacket undone, and he runs his hand through his hair, it is. He was agitated, even tense. Oh no - what's wrong Restless or not, he's always beyond beauty. How can

he look so... striking? It is such a pleasure to get up and drink in the sight of it.

'No trace... Ok... yes.' He turns around and sees me, and his whole demeanor changes.

From tension to relief to something else: a look that directly calls my inner goddess, a look of carnal sensuality, flamboyant gray eyes.

My mouth goes dry and desire blossoms in my body... whoa.

'Keep me posted,' he slams and turns off his phone as he deliberately walks towards me. I remain paralyzed as he narrows the distance between us, devouring me with his eyes. Holy shit... something's wrong - the tension in his jaw, the anxiety around his eyes.

He shrugs his jacket, undoes his black tie, and ties them both to the couch on his way to me. Then his arms are wrapped around me, and he pulls me towards him, hard, fast, gripping my poor Pittsburgh tail to lift my head, kissing me as his life depends on it. What is this mess? He painfully pulls the hair tie out of my hair, but I don't care. There is a primordial and

desperate quality in her kiss. He needs me for whatever reason right now, and I've never felt so wanted and coveted. It's dark and sensual and alarming at the same time. I kiss her back with equal fervor, my fingers twisting and fisting through her hair. Our languages intertwine, our passion and our ardor burst between us. It tastes divine, hot, sexy and its scent - all shower gel and Grayson are so exciting. He pulls his mouth away from mine, and he looks at me, seized by a nameless emotion.

'What's wrong?' I breathe.

'I'm so glad you're back. Shower with me - now.'

I cannot decide if this is a request or an order.

'Yes,' I whisper, and he grabs my hand, leading me out of the large room into his bedroom to his bathroom.

Once there, he frees me and runs the water in the too spacious shower.

Turning slowly, he looks at me, hooded eyes.

'I like your skirt. It's very short,' he said in a low voice. 'You have beautiful legs.'

He gets out of his shoes and bends down to remove each of his socks, never taking his eyes off me. I was speechless by the look of hunger in his eyes. Wow... to be this willed by this Greek god. I reflect on his actions and step out of my black apartments. Suddenly he reaches out to me, leaning me against the wall. Kiss me, my face, my throat, my lips... running his hands through my hair. I feel the cool, smooth tiled wall behind my back as it pushes against me so that I am flattened between its warmth and the cold of the ceramic. Tentatively, I place my arms on top of his upper arms, and he moans as I squeeze him tightly.

'I want you now. Here... quick, hard,' he breathes, and his hands are on my thighs, pulling up my skirt. 'Are you still bleeding?'

'No.' I rinse.

'Good.'

His thumbs catch on my white cotton panties, and suddenly he drops to his

knees pulling them. My skirt is now pulled down so that I'm naked from the waist down and panting, wanting. He grabs my hips, pushes me back against the wall, and kisses me on top of my thighs. Grabbing the top of my thighs, he spreads my legs. I moaned loudly, feeling his tongue encircle my clit. Oh my. Tilting my head involuntarily back, I moan as my fingers work their way through that hair.

Her tongue is relentless, strong, and insistent, leaving me - swirling around, over and over again - without stopping. It's exquisite, the intensity of the feeling - it's almost painful. My body starts to speed up and it frees me. What no! My breathing is irregular as I gasp, looking at him with delicious anticipation. He grabs my face with both hands, holding me tight, and he kisses me hard, thrusting his tongue into my mouth so I can taste my arousal.

Unzipping his fly, he frees himself, grabs the back of my thighs, and lifts me.

'Wrap your legs around me, baby,' he orders, his voice pressing, strained.

I do as I'm told and wrap my arms around his neck, and he moves quickly and sharply, filling me up. Ah! He gasps and I

moan. Holding my butt, his fingers digging into my soft flesh, he begins to move, slowly at first - a steady, steady rhythm... but as his control loosens, he accelerates... faster and faster. Ahhh! I tilt my head back and focus on the feeling of invasion, punishment, heavenly... pushing myself, pushing me... forward, higher, higher... and when I can't take it anymore, I explode around him, in an intense and devouring orgasm. He lets go with a deep growl, and he buries his head in my neck as he sinks into me, moaning loudly and incoherently as he finds his release.

His breathing is irregular, but he kisses me tenderly, not moving, still inside me, and I blink, not seeing in his eyes. As he focuses, he slowly comes out of me, holding me tight as I put my feet on the floor. The bathroom is now cloudy with steam...

and hot. I feel overdressed.

'You seem glad to see me,' I whisper with a shy smile.

His lips are raised.

'Yes, Miss Black, I think my pleasure is self-evident. Come - let me put you in the shower.'

He undoes the next three buttons on his shirt, takes off the cufflinks, pulls it over his head, and throws it on the floor. Takes off his suit pants and underpants, he puts them to the side. He begins to undo the buttons on my blouse as I watch him, eager to reach out and stroke his chest, but I contain myself.

'How was your trip?' he asks softly. He seems so much calmer now, his apprehension gone, dissolved by the sexual congress.

'Alright, thank you,' I whisper, still breathless. 'Thanks again for the first class. It really is a much nicer way to travel.' I smile shyly at him. 'I have news,' I added nervously.

'Oh?' he looks down at me as he undoes the last button, slips my blouse down my arms, and throws it over his discarded clothes.

'I have a job.'

He freezes, then smiles at me, his eyes warm and soft.

Congratulations, Miss Black. Now, will you tell me where?' he teases.

'You do not know?'

He shakes his head, frowning slightly.

'Why would I know that?'

'With your stalking abilities, I thought you could have…' I stop as her face drops. 'Naddalin, I wouldn't dream of interfering in your career, unless you ask me, of course. He looks hurt.

'So you have no idea which company?'

'No. I know there are four publishing houses in New York - so I guess this is one of them.'

'SIP'

'Oh, little one, good. Nice work.' He leans forward and kisses my forehead.

'Smart girl. When do you start?'

'Monday.'

'That soon, eh, I'd better take advantage of you while I still can. Turn around.'

I'm embarrassed by his causal ordering but do as I ask, and he undoes my bra and unzips my skirt. He pushes my skirt down, taking my behind as he does and kissing me on the shoulder. He leans against me and his nose rubs my hair, inhaling deeply. He squeezes my buttocks.

'You poison me, Miss Black, and you calm me down. Such an exhilarating combination. He kisses my hair. Taking my hand, he pulls me into the shower.

'Ouch,' I cry out. The water is practically hot. Grayson smiles at me as the waterfalls on him.

'It's just a little hot water.'

And in fact, he's right. It feels heavenly, wash off Georgia's sticky morning and the stickiness of our intercourse.

'Turn around,' he orders, and I obey, turning to face the wall. 'I want to wash you'

, he whispers and takes the shower gel. He squirts a little in his hand.

'I have something else to tell you,' I whisper as her hands start on my shoulders.

'Oh yes?' he asks softly.

I hold on with a deep breath.

'My friend Sam's photography exhibit opens Thursday in Pittsburgh.'

He stops moving, his hands hovering over my breasts. I emphasized the word 'friend'.

'Yes, what about?' he asks sternly.

'I said I would go. Would you like to come with me?'

After what seems like a monumental lapse of time, he slowly begins to wash me again.

'What time?'

'The opening is at 7:30 p.m.'

He kisses my ear.

'Okay.'

Inside my subconscious relaxes then collapses, slumped in an old damaged

chair. 'Were you nervous about asking me the question?'

'Yes. How can you tell?'

'Naddalin, your whole body is just relaxed,' he said dryly.

'Well, you just seem to be uh... on the jealous side.'

'Yes, I am,' he said darkly. 'And you better remember that.' But thank you for asking the question. We'll take Fake and Gay.

Oh, the helicopter, of course, dumbs me. No more flying... cool! I smile.

'Can I wash you?' I ask.

'I don't think so,' he whispers, and he kisses me softly on my neck to remove the sting of his refusal. I pout at the wall as he strokes my back with soap.

'Will you ever let me touch you?' I ask boldly.

He comes to a stop again, his hand on my behind.

'Put your hands on the wall Naddalin. I'll take you back,' he whispered

in my ear, grabbing my hips, and I know the discussion is over.

Later we sat at the breakfast counter, dressed in bathrobes, after consuming the rather excellent pasta of Mrs. Jones with the vongole.

'More wine?' Grayson asks, gray eyes shining.

'A little drink, please.' The Sancerre is crunchy and delicious. Grayson pours one for me and one for himself.

'How's the um… situation that brought you to New York?' I ask shyly.

He frowns.

'Out of control,' he whispers bitterly. 'But you don't have to worry, Naddalin. I have plans for you tonight.

'Oh?'

'Yes. I want you to be ready and be waiting in my playroom in fifteen minutes.' He gets up and looks at me.

'You can get ready in your bedroom. By the way, the walk-in closet is now full of clothes for you. I don't want any argument about them.' He narrows his

eyes, daring me to say something. When I don't, he walks over to his office.

Me! Chat with you, numerous Shadows is more than my butt. I sit on the barstool, momentarily stunned, trying to digest this piece of information. He bought me clothes. I roll my eyes exaggeratedly knowing full well that he can't see me. Car, phone, computer... clothes, it'll be a fucking condo next, and then I'll be his mistress.

Ho! My subconscious has its sly face. I ignored her and made my way upstairs to my room so he's still mine... why I thought he had agreed to let me sleep with him.

I guess he's not used to sharing his personal space, but neither am I. I console myself by thinking that at least I have a place to escape him.

Examining the door, I find that it has a lock but no key. I wonder briefly if Ms. Jones has a spare. I'll ask him. I open the closet door and close it quickly. Holy Crap - he spent a fortune. It looks like Maury's - so many clothes hanging neatly on the rail. Deep down, I know they will all be fine. But I don't have time to think about

it - I have to kneel in the red room of… pain… or pleasure - with any luck tonight.

Kneeling by the door, I'm naked except for my panties. My heart is in my mouth. Damn, I thought after the bathroom he would have had enough. Man is insatiable, or maybe all men are like him. I don't know, no one would compare it to. By closing my eyes, I try to calm down, to connect with my inner submarine. She is there somewhere, hidden behind my inner goddess.

Anticipation boils like soda through my veins. What will he do? I take a deep breath, but I can't deny it. I'm already horny, horny and it's wet and dripping with my thick shiny goodness down to my butt opening. This is so... I want to think badly, but somehow it's not. It's good for Grayson. This is what he wants - and after the last few days... after all, he's done, I have to get up and take whatever he decides he wants, whatever he thinks he needs.

The memory of her gaze when I came home tonight, the desire on her face, her determined step towards me as if I were an oasis in the desert. I would do almost anything to see that look again. I press my thighs together at the delicious

memory, and it reminds me that I need to part my knees. I put them aside. How long will he make me wait? The wait paralyzes me, paralyzes me with a dark and tantalizing desire. I take a glance around the subtly lit room; the cross, the table, the sofa, the bench... this bed. It is so big and made up of red satin sheets. What device will he use?

The door opens and Grayson enters, ignoring me completely. I quickly look down, fixing my hands, positioned carefully on my spread thighs. Placing something on the large chest next to the door, he casually walks over to the bed. I let myself go to take a glance at him and my heart almost stops. He's naked except for those soft ripped jeans, the top button was casually undone. Damn, he looks so hot. My subconscious fires frantically, and my inner goddess swings and writhes in a primitive carnal rhythm. She is so ready. I lick my lips instinctively. My blood runs through my body, thick and heavy with salacious hunger. What will he do to me?

Turning around, he casually walks back to the dresser. By opening one, he starts removing objects and placing them on top. My curiosity burns, even burns, but

I resist the overwhelming temptation to take a quick look. When he has finished what he is doing, he comes to stand in front of me. I can see her bare feet, and I want to kiss every square inch of it... run my tongue over her instep, suck on each of her toes. Holy shit.

'You look lovely,' he hisses.

I keep my head down, aware that he is staring at me as I am practically naked. I feel the redness as it slowly spreads across my face. He leans in and takes my chin, forcing my face to meet his gaze.

'You are a beautiful woman, Naddalin. And you're all mine, 'he whispers. 'Get up.' His order is sweet and full of sensual promises.

Shaking, I get up.

'Look at me,' he breathes, and I look at his burning gray gaze. It's her Dom look - cold, hard, and sexy as hell, seven shades of sin in one seductive gaze. My mouth is dry and I know I'll do whatever he asks me to. An almost cruel smile passes over his lips.

'We don't have a signed contract, Naddalin. But we discussed the limits. And I want to reiterate that we have safe words, okay?'

Holy shit... what the hell is he planning for me to need safe words?

'What are they?' he asks with authority.

I frown slightly at her question, and her face noticeably hardens.

'What are the safe words, Naddalin?' he said slowly and deliberately.

'Yellow,' I mumble.

'And?'

He calls out, his mouth sticking up in a hard line.

'Red', I breathe.

'Remember this.'

And I can't help it… I raise my eyebrows at him and am about to remind him of my surrogacy, but the sudden frosty glow in his icy gray eyes stops me in my tracks.

'Don't start with your smart mouth here, Miss Black. Or I'll fuck her with you on her knees. Do you understand?

I instinctively swallow. Okay. I blink quickly, berated. It’s his tone of voice, rather than the threat, that intimidates me.

'Good?'

'Yes, sir,' I mumble hastily.

'Good girl,' he stops, staring at me. 'My intention is not that you have to keep the word because you are in pain. What I intend to do to you will be intense. Very intense, and you have to guide me. Do you understand?'

Not really. Intense - Wow.

'It's a matter of touching, Naddalin. You won't be able to see me or hear me. But you will be able to feel me.'

I frown - can't hear it. How is this going to work? It spins, and I hadn't noticed that above the chest is a sleek, flat, matte black box. As he waves his hand in front, the box splits in two: two sliding doors open revealing a CD player and a host of buttons. Grayson presses several of these buttons in sequence. Nothing happens, but he seems

satisfied. I am mystified. When he turns to face me, he wears his little smile, I have a secret.

'I'll tie you to this bed, Naddalin. But I'll blindfold you first and, 'he reveals his iPod in his hand, 'You won't be able to hear me. All you'll hear is the music I'll play for you. '

Okay. A musical interlude, not what I expected. Does he ever do what I expect?

Damn, I hope this isn't rap.

'Come.' Taking my hand, he leads me to the old four-poster bed. There are shackles attached to each corner, thin metal chains with leather cuffs, which shine against the red satin.

Oh boy, I think my heart is going to leave my chest, and I'm melting from the inside out, the desire running through me. Could I be more excited?

'Stay here.'

I am facing the bed. He leans in and whispers in my ear.

'Wait here, keep your eyes on the bed. Imagine lying here bound and totally at my mercy.'

Oh my.

He walks away for a moment, and I can hear him near the door looking for something.

All my senses are hyper-alert, my hearing more acute. He picked up something from the rack of whips and paddles near the door. Holy cow. What will he do?

I can feel it behind me. He takes my hair, pulls it in a ponytail behind me, and starts to braid it.

'Although I love your braids, Naddalin, I am too impatient to be against you right now. So it will have to be done. Her voice is low, soft.

His deft fingers brush my back now and then as they work through my hair, and every occasional touch is like a gentle electric shock against my skin. He ties the end with a tie, then gently pulls the braid so I have to back up against him. He pulls to the side again so that I tilt my head, giving him easier access to my neck. Leaning

down, he strokes my neck. Tracing his teeth and tongue from the base of my ear to my shoulder.

He hums softly as he does, and the sound echoes through me. Right down... right over there inside of me. Unwavering, I moan softly.

'Hush now,' he breathes against my skin. He raises his hands in front of me, his arms touching mine. In his right hand is a whip. I remember the name of my first introduction to this room.

'Touch him,' he whispers, and he looks like the devil himself. My body ignites in response. Tentatively, I reach out and brush the long strands. It has many long slings, all of the soft suede with small beads at the end.

'I'll use that. It won't hurt, but it will bring your blood to the surface of your skin and make you very sensitive.'

Oh, he says it won't hurt.

'What are the safe words, Naddalin?'

'Uh... yellow and red, sir,' I whisper.

'Good girl. Remember, most of your fear is in your mind.'

He drops the whip onto the bed and his hands move to my waist.

'You won't need them,' he whispers and hooks his fingers into my panties and sweeps them down my legs. I step away from it with an unsteady step, supporting myself on the ornate post of the bed.

'Stay still,' he orders and kisses me behind then gently pinches me twice, making me tense. 'Now lie down. Face up, 'he adds, hitting me hard on the butt, making me jump.

Hastily, I crawl onto the hard, inflexible mattress of the bed and lay down, looking up at him. The satin of the sheet under me feels soft and cool against my skin. His gaze is impassive, except for his eyes which shine with barely leashed excitement.

'Hands above your head,' he orders, and I do as I suggest.

Damn, my body is hungry for him. I already want it.

He turns around, and out of the corner of my eye, I watch him wander over to the dresser, coming back with the iPod and what looks like an eye mask, similar to the one I used on my flight. Atlanta. The thought makes me want to smile, but I can't seem to get my lips to cooperate. I'm too wrapped up in anticipation. I just know my face is completely still, my eyes huge, as I look at him.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he shows me the iPod. He has a strange antenna device as well as headphones. So bizarre. I frown trying to figure this out.

'It sends what's playing on the iPod to the system in the room.' Grayson answers my unspoken question by tapping on the little antenna. 'I can hear what you hear and I have a remote control for it.' He smiles with his private joke smile and holds up a small, flat device that looks like a very trendy calculator. He leans across me, gently pushes the headphones into my ears, and sets the iPod somewhere on the bed above my head.

'Lift your head,' he orders, and I do so immediately.

Slowly he slips off the mask, pulling the rubber band over the back of my head, and I'm blind. The elastic of the mask keeps the headphones in place. I can still hear him, although the sound is muffled as he gets up from the bed. I am deafened by my breathing - it is shallow and erratic, reflecting my arousal. Grayson takes my left arm, gently stretches it to the left corner, and ties the leather cuff around my wrist. His long fingers stroke the length of my arm once he's done. Oh! Its touch causes a delicious and ticklish thrill. I hear him slowly move to the other side, take my right arm and handcuff it. Again, his long fingers linger along my arm. Oh my... I'm already fit to burst. Why is it so erotic?

He moves down the bed and grabs both of my ankles.

'Raise your head,' he orders.

I obey, and he drags me onto the bed so that my arms are stretched out and almost stretched out at the wrists. Holy cow, I cannot move my arms. A shiver of apprehension mixed with tantalizing exhilaration runs through my body, making me wetter. I moan. Separating my legs, he handcuffs my right ankle first, then my left, so I am staked, quartered, and vulnerable

to him. It's so annoying that I can't see it. I listen loudly... to what he is doing and hear nothing, just my breathing and the thud of my heart as the blood beats furiously against my eardrums.

Suddenly, the soft silent hiss and sound of the iPod come to life. From inside my head, a lonely angelic voice sings unaccompanied a long, sweet note, and it is joined almost immediately by another voice, then other voices - Holy Cow, a heavenly choir - singing acapella in my head, an ancient and ancient hymn. What name of Heaven have I never heard of anything like it? Something almost unbearably soft brushes my neck, flowing languidly down my throat, slowly over my chest, over my breasts, stroking me... pulling on my nipples, it's so soft, brushing underneath. It's so unexpected. It's fur!

A fur glove?

Grayson drags his hand, unhurried and deliberate, up to my stomach, circling my navel, then carefully from hip to hip, and I try to anticipate where he's going next... but the music... c is in my head... carrying me... the fur through the line of my pubic hair... between my legs, down my thighs, down one leg... up the other... it

almost tickles... but not quite.. more voices join... the ch SPOTLIGHT c heavenly Father singing all different parts, their voices mingling with happiness and sweetness in a melodic harmony that is beyond anything I've ever heard. I catch a word - 'deus' - and realize that they are singing in Latin. And yet the fur is moving down my arms and around my waist... back onto my breasts. My nipples harden from the soft-touch... and I gasp... I wonder where her hand will go next. Suddenly the fur is gone, and I can feel the whip fronds running over my skin, following the same path as the fur, and it's so hard to focus with the music in my head - it sounds like a hundred singing voices, weaving an ethereal tapestry of silky fine gold and silver in my head, mixed with the feel of soft suede against my skin... dragging over me... oh my... suddenly she disappears. Then suddenly, it bites my stomach.

'Aagghh! I scream. It takes me by surprise, and it doesn't hurt, but tingling all over the place, and it hits me again. Stronger.

'Aaah!

I want to move, to twist... to escape, or to welcome every hit... I don't

know - it's so overwhelming... I can't pull my arms..... my legs are stuck... I'm held very firmly in place... and again he hits my breasts - I scream. And it's a sweet agony - bearable, just... pleasant - no, not immediately, but as my skin sings with each stroke in perfect counterpoint to the music in my head, I am drawn into a dark, dark part of my psyche which surrenders to this most erotic sensation. Yes - I understand that. He hits me on my hip. Then it moves in quick strokes on my pubic hair, on my thighs, and on the inside of my thighs... and my body... on my hips. It continues as the music climaxes, then suddenly - the music stops. And him too. Then the singing starts again... building and building, and it's raining blows on me... and I moan and twist. Again it ceases and all is calm... except my wild breathing... and my wild desire. Too... oh... what is happening? What is he going to do now? The excitement is almost unbearable. I entered a very dark carnal place.

The bed shifts and moves when I feel it climbing over me, and the song starts again. He repeated it... this time it's his nose and lips replacing the fur... running down my neck and throat, kissing me, sucking... down to my breasts... Ah!

Taunting each of my nipples in turn... his tongue swirls around one as his fingers relentlessly tease the other... I moan, loudly I think, although I can't hear. I'm lost. Lost in him... lost in the astral and seraphic voices... lost in all the sensations that I cannot escape... I am completely at the mercy of his expert touch.

He descends towards my stomach - his tongue circling my navel - following the path of the whip and the fur... I moan. He kisses, sucks and nibbles... moves south...

-And-

Then his tongue is there. At the junction of my thighs. I throw my head back and scream as I almost explode to orgasm... I'm on the brink, and he stops.

No! The bed moves and he kneels between my legs. He leans towards the bedpost and the cuff on my ankle is suddenly gone. I pull my leg to the middle of the bed... resting it against him. He leans over to the opposite post and releases my other leg. His hands travel rapidly down both of my legs, squeezing and kneading, bringing them back to life. Then, grabbing my hips, he lifts me so my back is off the bed. I am arched, resting on my shoulders.

What he's kneeling between my legs… and in a quick, snapping motion he's inside of me… oh damn… and I'm screaming again. The thrill of my impending orgasm begins, and it freezes. The quiver dies… oh no… it will torture me further.

'Please!' I'm crying.

He squeezes me tighter… as a warning, I don't know, his fingers digging into the flesh of my butt as I remained panting… so I stopped voluntarily. Very slowly, he begins to move again… out than in… excruciatingly slowly. Holy shit - Please! I'm screaming inside… And as the number of voices in the choir room increases… its rhythm, infinitely, it's so controlled… so in tune with the music. And I can't take it anymore.

'Please,' I beg you, and with a quick movement he pulls me back down onto the bed, and he's lying on top of me, his hands on the bed next to my breasts as he supports her. weight and it sinks into me. As the music climaxes, I fall… in free fall… into the most intense and scary orgasm I have ever had, and Grayson follows me… pushing hard inside me, three once more… then collapsing on top of me.

As my consciousness returns from wherever it has been, Grayson withdraws from me. The music has stopped and I can feel him stretch over my body as he undoes the cuff on my right wrist. I moan as my hand is released. He quickly releases my other hand, gently removes the mask from my eyes, and removes the headphones. I blink in the soft faint light and fix his intense gray gaze.

'Hi,' he whispers.

'Hi yourself,' I replied shyly. His lips move into a smile, and he leans in and kisses me softly.

'Well done, you,' he whispers. 'Turnover.'

Holy shit - what is he gonna do now? Her eyes soften.

'I'm just going to rub your shoulders.'

'Oh okay.'

I roll stiffly across my forehead. I am so tired. Grayson sits astride me and begins to massage my shoulders. I moan loudly - he has such strong and

knowledgeable fingers. Leaning down, he kisses my head.

'What was that music?' I mumble almost inarticulately.

'It's called Spem In Alium, or the forty-part motet, by Thomas Tallis.'

'It was... overwhelming.'

'I always wanted to fuck with that.'

'Not another first, Mr. Maury?'

'Indeed, Miss Black.

I moan again as his fingers work their magic on my shoulders.

'Well, this is my first time fucking with this too,' I whisper sleepily.

'Hmm... you and I are giving each other many firsts.' His voice is down to earth.

'What did I tell you in my sleep, Ch - uh, sir?'

His hands interrupt their healing for a moment.

'You said a lot of things, Naddalin. You said cages and strawberries… that you wanted more… and that you missed me.'

Oh, thank God for that.

'Is that all?' The relief in my voice is evident.

Grayson stops his divine message and moves so that he lies down next to me. His head resting on his elbow. He frowns.

'What did you think you said?'

Oh shit.

'That I thought you were ugly, conceited, and hopeless in bed.'

His crease on his forehead deepens.

'Well, of course I am all of these things, and now you really intrigue me.' What are you hiding from me, Miss Black?

I blink my eyes at him innocently.

'I'm not hiding anything.'

'Naddalin, you are a hopeless liar.'

'I thought you were going to make me laugh after sex, it's not for me.'

His lips are raised.

'I can't tell jokes.'

'Mr. Maury! Something you can't do?' I smile at him and he smiles back at me.

'No, hopeless joke-teller.' He looks so proud of himself that I start to laugh.

'I'm also a hopeless joke-teller.'

'It's such a lovely sound,' he whispers, and leans forward and kisses me.

'And you're hiding something, Naddalin. I might have to torture him.

I wake up with a shake. I think I just fell down a staircase in a dream, and I sit up, momentarily disoriented. It's dark and I'm alone in Grayson's bed. Something woke me up, a nagging thought. I glance at the alarm clock on his bedside. It's 5 a.m, but I feel rested. Why is it Oh - it's the jet lag - it would be 8:00 am in Georgia. Holy shit... I need to take my pill. I climb out of bed, grateful for everything that has woken me up. I hear low notes from the piano. Grayson is playing. I have to see it. I love to watch him play. Naked, I take my bathrobe from the chair and walk quietly down the

hall, putting on my bathrobe and listening to the magical sound of the melodic lament coming from the great room.

Shrouded in darkness, Grayson sits in a bubble of light as he plays, and his hair shines in burnished coppery highlights. He looks naked, even though I know he's wearing his pajamas

funds. He concentrates, plays beautifully, lost in the melancholy of the music. I hesitate, looking out of the shadows, not wanting to interrupt. I want to hold it.

He looks lost, sad even, and painfully lonely - or maybe it's just the music that is so full of poignant sadness. It ends the song, pauses for a split second, then starts playing it again.

I walk cautiously towards him, drawn like the moth to the flame... the idea makes me smile.

He looks at me and frowns before his gaze returns to his hands. Oh shit, is he upset that I'm bothering him?

'You should be asleep,' he growls softly.

I can tell he's worried about something.

'And you too,' I retorted not so quietly.

He looks up again, his lips twisting with a hint of a smile.

'Are you scolding me, Miss Black?'

'Yes, Mr. Maury, I am.

'Well, I can't sleep.' He frowns once more as a trace of irritation or anger crosses his face. With me, certainly not.

I ignore his facial expression and very courageously sit next to him on the piano stool, placing my head on his bare shoulder to watch his nimble and dexterous fingers stroke the keys. It pauses fractionally, then continues until the end of the song.

'What was that?' I ask gently.

'Chopin. Opus 28, number 4. In E minor, if that interests you,' he whispers.

'I am always interested in what you do.'

He turns and gently presses his lips against my hair.

'I didn't mean to wake you up.'

'You didn't. Play the other one.'

'Another?'

'The Bach piece you played the first night I stayed.'

'Oh, Marcel.

He begins to play slowly and deliberately. I feel the movement of his hands on his shoulder as I lean against him and close my eyes. Sad, moving notes swirl slowly and sadly around us, echoing off the walls. It is a piece of haunting beauty, even sadder than the Chopin, and I lose myself in the beauty of the lament. To some extent, it reflects how I feel. The deep and moving desire that I have to know this extraordinary man better, to try to understand his sadness. Too soon, the play comes to an end.

'Why do you only play such sad music?'

I sit up straight and watch him as he shrugs in response to my question, his

expression suspicious: 'So you were only six when you started playing?' I invited him.

He nods, his suspicious gaze intensifying. After a while, he volunteered.

'I started learning the piano to please my new mother.'

'To fit into the perfect family?'

'Yes, so to speak,' he said evasively. 'Why are you awake, you don't need to recover from yesterday's efforts?'

'It's 8 am for me. And I have to take my pill.'

He raises his eyebrows in surprise.

'Well remembered,' he whispers, and I can tell he's impressed. His lips curl up in a half-smile.

'Only you would start a course of specific birth control pills by the hour in a different time zone. Maybe you would have to wait half an hour, then another half hour tomorrow morning.

So eventually you can take them at a reasonable time. '

'Good plan', I breathe. 'So what will we do for half an hour?' I blink innocently at him.

'I can think of several things,' he smirked, his gray eyes shining. I look back impassively as my insides tighten and melt under his knowing gaze.

'On the other hand, we could talk,' I suggest quietly.

His forehead creases.

'I prefer what I have in mind.' He brings me back to his knees.

'You'd always rather have sex than talk,' I laughed, stabilizing myself as I held his upper arms.

'True. Especially with you.' He rubs my hair and begins a steady trail of kisses from below my ear to my throat. 'Maybe on my piano,' he whispers.

Oh my. My whole body tightens at the thought. Piano. Wow.

'I want to fix something,' I whisper as my pulse begins to quicken, and my inner goddess closes her eyes, reveling in the feel of her lips on me.

He pauses momentarily before continuing his sensual assault.

'Always so hungry for information, Miss Black. What needs to be addressed?' he breathes against my skin at the base of my neck, continuing his soft gentle kisses.

'Us,' I whisper, closing my eyes.

'Hmm. How about us?' He stops his trail of kisses down my shoulder.

'The contract.'

He lifts his head to look at me, a hint of amusement in his eyes, and sighs. He strokes his fingers on my cheek.

'Well, I think the contract is moot, isn't it?' Her voice is low and hoarse, her eyes soft.

'Questionable.' He smiles. I look at him questioningly.

'But you were so excited.'

'Well, that was before. Either way, the rules aren't theoretical, they still apply.' His expression hardened slightly.

'Before, before what?'

'Before,'... He pauses, and the suspicious expression returns, 'more.' He shrugs his shoulders.

'Oh.'

'Besides, we've been to the rec room twice now, and you haven't run screaming for the hills.'

'Do you expect me to do this?'

'Nothing is expected of you, Naddalin,' he said dryly.

'So, let me be clear. You just want me to follow the Rules element of the contract all the time but not the rest of the contract?'

'Except in the rec room. I want you to follow the spirit of the contract in the rec room, and yes, I want you to follow the rules - all the time. So I know you'll be safe, and I'll be able to have you whenever I want. '

'What if I break anyof the rules?'

'Then I'll punish you.'

'But won't you need my permission?'

'Yes.'

'What if I say no?'

He looks at me for a moment, with a confused expression.

'If you say no, you'll say no. I'm going to have to find a way to persuade you.'

I step away from him and get up. I need some distance. He frowns as I watch him. He looks puzzled and suspicious again.

'So the punishment aspect remains.'

'Yes, but only if you break the rules.'

'I'll need to read them again,' I said, trying to remember the details.

'I'll get them for you.' His tone is suddenly professional.

Whoa. It got serious so quickly. He gets up from the piano and walks slowly to his desk. My scalp itches. Damn, I need some tea. The future of our so-called relationship is discussed at 5:45 a.m. when he is preoccupied with something else.

Is it wise that I go to the kitchen which is still shrouded in darkness? Where are the light switches? I find them, turn them on, and pour water into the kettle. My pill! I rumble in my purse that I left on the breakfast counter and find them quickly. A swallow and I are done. By the time I'm done, Grayson is back, sitting on one of the bar stools, watching me intently.

'Here is.' He pushes a piece of typed paper towards me and I notice he's crossed out some things.

RULES

Obedience:

The Submissive will obey all instructions given by the Dominant immediately, without hesitation or reservation, and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will accept any sexual activity deemed suitable and pleasurable by the Dominant, except those activities which are described within strict limits (Annex A.) She will do so with eagerness and without hesitation.

Sleep:

The Submissive will ensure that she achieves a minimum of eight hours of

sleep per night when not with The Dominant.

Food:

The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and well-being from a list of prescribed foods (Appendix 4.) The Submissive will not snack between meals, except for fruit.

Clothing:

With The Dominant, The Submissive will only wear clothing approved by The Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for the Submitter, which the Submitter will use. The Dominant will accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis.

Exercise:

The Dominant will provide the Submitter with a personal trainer four three times per week in one-hour sessions, at times to be mutually agreed upon between the personal trainer and the Submitter. The personal trainer will report to The Dominant on the progress of The Submissive.

Personal hygiene / Beauty:

The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or shaved at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon selected by The Dominant at times determined by The Dominant, and undergo such treatment as The Dominant deems appropriate.

Personal security:

The submissive does not drink excessively, smoke, take recreational drugs, or put herself in unnecessary danger.

Personal qualities:

The Submissive will not enter into any sexual relationship with anyone other than the Dominant. The Submissive will conduct herself at all times respectfully and modestly. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection of The Dominant. It will be held responsible for any mischief, wrongdoing, and misconduct committed outside the presence of the Dominant.

Failure to comply with any of the above conditions will result in immediate punishment, the nature of which will be determined by the Dominant.

'So the obedience thing still holds?'

'Oh yes.' He smiles.

I shake my head amused, and before I know it, I roll my eyes at him.

'Did you just roll your eyes at me, Naddalin?' He breathes.

Oh fuck.

'Maybe, it depends on your reaction.'

'As always,' he said, shaking his head slightly, his eyes shining with excitement.

I swallow instinctively and a thrill of elation runs through me.

'So...' Holy shit. What am I going to do?

'Yes?' He licks his lower lip.

'You want to spank me now.'

'Yes. And I will.'

'Oh, really, Mr. Maury?' I challenge him by smiling. Two people can play this game.

'Are you going to stop me?'

'You're going to have to catch me first.'

His eyes widen a little, and he smiles, standing up slowly.

'Oh, really, Miss Black?'

The breakfast bar is between us. I have never been so grateful for its existence as I am now.

'And you bite your lip,' he hisses, slowly moving to his left as I walk over to mine.

'You wouldn't,' I tease. 'After all, you roll your eyes.' I try to reason with him. He continues to move to his left, just like me.

'Yes, but you've just raised the bar for excitement with this game.' His eyes shine and mad anticipation emanates from him.

'I'm pretty quick you know.' I try nonchalance.

'So I am.'

He's stalking me, in his kitchen.

'Are you going to come quietly?' he asks.

'Have I already done this?'

'Miss Black, what do you mean?' he smiles. 'It will be worse for you if I have to come and get you.'

'It's only if you catch me, Grayson. And right now, I don't plan on letting you catch me.

'Naddalin, you may fall and hurt yourself. Which will put you in direct violation of rule number seven.

'I have been in danger since I met you, Mr. Maury, rules or no rules.'

'Yes you have.' He pauses and his forehead furrows slightly.

Suddenly he rushes over to me, making me scream and run to the dining room table. I do it to escape, setting the table between us. My heart is pounding and the adrenaline rushed through my body... boy... it's so exciting. I'm a kid again, though that's not fair. I watch him intently as he deliberately walks towards me. I digress.

'You sure know how to distract a man, Naddalin.

``We aim to please Mr. Maury. Distract yourself from what?

'Life. The universe.' He waves one of his hands vaguely.

'You seemed very concerned while you were playing.'

He stops and crosses his arms, his expression amused.

'We can do this all day, baby, but I'll get you, and it'll just be worse for you when I do.' 'No, you won't.' I must not be overconfident. I repeat it like a mantra. My subconscious has found her Nikes, and she's on the starting blocks.

'anyone would think you don't want me to catch you.'

'I don't. That's the point. I feel the punishment the way you feel when I touch you.' His whole behavior changes in a nanosecond. Gone is the Grayson player, and he looks at me like I slapped him. He is ashy.

'Is that how you feel?' he whispers.

These four words, and the way he pronounces them, say a lot. Oh no. They tell me so much more about him and how he feels. They tell me about his fear and his hatred. I frown.

No, I don't feel so bad. Certainly not. Do I?

'No. It doesn't affect me that much, but it does give you an idea,' I whisper, looking at him anxiously.

'Oh,' he said.

Shit. He looks completely and utterly lost like I pulled the rug out from under his feet.

Taking a deep breath, I walk around the table until I find myself in front of him, looking him in his worried eyes.

'Do you hate it that much?' he breathes, his eyes filled with horror.

'Well… no,' I reassure him. Jeez - is that how he feels when people touch him?

'No. I feel ambivalent about it. I don't like it, but I don't hate it.'

'But last night in the playroom you…' He pauses.

'I'm doing it for you, Grayson, because you need it. I don't. You didn't hurt me last night.

It was in a different context, and I can rationalize that internally, and I trust you. But when you want to punish me, I'm afraid you'll hurt me. '

His gray eyes shine like a turbulent storm. Time moves expand, and recedes before it responds softly.

'I want to hurt you. But not beyond anything you couldn't stand.'

Shit!

'Why?'

He runs his hand through his hair and shrugs.

'I just need it.' He pauses, looks at me in anguish, closes his eyes, and shakes his head. 'I can't tell you,' he whispers.

'Can't or can't?'

'Habit.'

'So you know why.'

'Yes.'

'But you won't tell me.'

'If I do, you'll run screaming from this room, and you'll never want to go back there again.' He looks at me suspiciously. 'I can't risk this, Naddalin.

'You want me to stay.'

'More than you think. I couldn't bear to lose you.'

Oh my.

He looks at me, and suddenly he hugs me and kisses me, kisses me passionately. It takes me completely by surprise, and I feel his panic and his desperate need in his kiss.

'Don't leave me. You said you wouldn't leave me, and you begged me not to leave you, in your sleep,' he whispered against my lips.

Oh... my nightly confessions.

'I do not want to go.' And my heart sinks, turning around.

He's a man in need. His fear is naked and obvious, but he is lost... somewhere in its darkness. His eyes wide and dreary and tortured. I can calm him

down. Join him briefly in the dark and bring him into the light.

'Show me,' I whisper.

'To show you?'

'Show me how bad it can hurt.'

'What?'

'Punish me. I want to know how bad this can get.'

Grayson pulls away from me, completely confused.

'Would you try?'

'Yes. I said I would.' But I have an ulterior motive. If I do this for him, maybe he will let me touch him.

He blinks at me.

'Naddalin, you are so confusing.'

'I'm confused too. I'm trying to work this out. And you and I will know, once and for all, if I can do this. If I can handle this, then maybe you -' My words fail me, and his eyes widen again. He knows I'm referring to the tactile thing. For a moment he looks torn, but then a steely resolution

settles on his features, and he narrows his eyes, looking at me speculatively as if he is weighing alternatives.

Abruptly, he squeezes my arm in a firm grip and turns around, leading me out of the great room, up the stairs, and into the playroom. Pleasure and pain, reward and punishment - his words from so long ago resonate in my mind.

'I'll show you how bad this can be, and you can make up your mind.' He stops near the door. 'Are you ready for this?'

I nod, my decision is made, and I'm vaguely dizzy, weak as all the blood leaves my face. He opens the door, and still grabbing my arm, grabs what looks like a belt on the rack next to the door, then leads me to the red leather bench in the far corner of the room.

'Lean over the bench,' he whispers.

Okay. I can do it. I bend over the soft, smooth leather. He left my bathrobe.

In a quiet part of my brain, I'm vaguely surprised that he didn't have me remove it. Fuck, it's gonna hurt... I know. My subconscious has faded and my inner goddess is trying to appear brave.

'We're here because you said yes, Naddalin. And you ran away from me. I will hit you six times, and you will count with me.

Why the hell doesn't he get along? He always makes such a meal punishing me. I roll my eyes, knowing full well that he can't see me.

He lifts the hem of my robe, and for some reason, it feels more intimate than being naked. He gently strokes my butt, running his warm hand over both cheeks and up to the top of my thighs.

'I'm doing this so that you remember not to run away from me, and as exciting as it is, I never want you to run away from me,' he whispered.

-And-

The iroPittsburgh is not lost on me. I was running to avoid this. If he had opened his arms, I would run towards him, not far from him.

'And you rolled your eyes at me. You know how I feel about this.' Suddenly it's gone- that nervous, nervous fear in his voice. He is back wherever he is. I hear it in his tone, in the way he places his fingers on

my back, holding me - and the atmosphere in the room changes.

I close my eyes, bracing for the blow. It comes hard, slamming on my back, and the belt bite is all I was worried about. I scream involuntarily and take a huge gulp of air.

'Count, Naddalin!’ He commands.

'A!' I yell at him and it sounds like a curse.

It hits me again, and the pain throbs and echoes along the beltline. Holy shit... clever.

'Of them!' I scream. It's so good to scream.

His breathing is irregular and hard. While mine is almost nonexistent as I desperately dig around my psyche for internal strength. The belt cuts my flesh again.

'Three!' The unwelcome tears welled up in my eyes. Damn - it's harder than I thought - so much harder than spanking. He doesn't hold back anything.

'Four! I scream as the belt bites me again, and now tears are streaming down my face.

I don't want to cry. It makes me angry that I cry. He hits me again.

'Five.' My voice is more of a strangled, strangled sob, and right now I think I hate it. One more, I can make one more. I feel like my back is on fire.

'Six,' I whisper as the searing pain crosses me again, and I hear him drop the belt behind me, and he pulls me into his arms, breathless and compassionate... and I don't want any of him...

'Let go… no…' And I find myself fighting his grip, pushing him away. Fight it.

'Do not touch me!' I whistle. I sit up and look at him, and he looks at me like I could explode, gray eyes wide, puzzled. I angrily throw tears from my eyes with the backs of my hands, staring at him.

'Is that what you really love me like?' I use the sleeve of the robe to wipe my nose.

He looks at me suspiciously.

'Well, you're a fucked up son of a bitch.'

'Naddalin,' he pleads, shocked.

'Don't dare, Naddalin me! You have to sort your shit, Maury!' And with that, I turn around stiffly, and walk out of the playroom, shutting the door quietly behind me.

I squeeze the doorknob behind me and lean briefly against the door. Where to go?

Am I running? I'm so mad, angry burning tears roll down my cheeks, and I part them with fury. I just wanna curl up. Relax and recover somehow. Heal my broken faith. How could I have been so stupid? Of course, it hurts.

Temporarily, I rub my back. Aah! It's painful. Where to go Not his room. My room, or the room that will be mine, no, is mine... was mine. That's why he wanted me to keep him. He knew I would need to get away from him.

I set off stiffly in that direction, aware that Grayson can follow me. It's still dark in the room, dawn is just a whisper on the horizon. I awkwardly climb into bed,

being careful not to sit on my aching, tender back. I keep the robe on, wrap it around me, curl up and let go - sobbing loudly into my pillow.

What was I thinking? Why did I let him do this to me? I wanted the darkness to explore how bad it could be - but it's too dark for me. I can not do that. Yet that's what he does, that's how he gets his kicks.

What a monumental awakening. And to be fair to him, he warned me and warned me, time and time again. It is not normal. He has needs that I cannot meet. I realize it now.

I don't want him to hit me like that again, ever. I think about the two or three times he hit me and how easy he was on me in comparison. Is it enough for him? I sob harder into the pillow. I will lose it. He won't want to be with me if I can't give this to him.

Why, why, why did I fall in love with numerous Shadows? Why can't I love Sam, or Paul Eastwood, or someone like me?

Oh, his distraught look when I left. I was so cruel, so shocked by the

savagery... will he forgive me... will I forgive him? My thoughts are all out of whack and confused, echoing and bouncing inside my skull. My subconscious shakes its head sadly, and my inner goddess is nowhere to be found. Oh, it's a dark soul morning for me. I am so lonely. I want my mom. I remember his farewell words at the airport, Follow your heart, honey, and please try not to think too much. Relax and enjoy. You are so young, darling, you have so much to live for, let it happen.

You deserve the best of everything.

I followed my heart, and my ass hurt and an anguished, broken mind to show. I have to go. This is it... I have to go. He's not good for me and I'm not good for him. How can we make this work? And the thought of never seeing him again practically chokes me... my numerous Shadows.

I hear the door open. Oh no - there it is. He puts something on the bedside table, and the bed moves under his weight as he climbs up behind me.

'Hush,' he hisses, and I want to get away from him, get to the other side of the bed, but I'm paralyzed. I can't move and lie

stiffly, not giving in at all. 'Don't beat me, Naddalin, please,' he whispers. Slowly, he takes me in his arms, buries his nose in my hair, kisses my neck.

'Don't hate me,' he breathes softly against my skin, his voice painfully sad. My heart tightens again and releases another wave of silent sobs. He continues to kiss me softly, tenderly, but I remain distant and suspicious.

We have been lying together like this, saying nothing for centuries. He just holds me, and very gradually I relax and stop crying. Dawn comes and goes, and the soft light becomes brighter as the morning progresses, and we still lie.

'I bought you Advil and Arnica Cream,' he said after a long moment.

I turn very slowly in his arms so that I can face him. I lay my head on his arm. His eyes are flint gray and guarded.

I look at her beautiful face. He doesn't give anything, but he keeps his eyes on mine, barely blinking. Oh, he's so breathtakingly beautiful. In such a short time he has become so Dear, to me. Reaching out, I stroke her cheek and run

my fingers through her stubble. He closes his eyes and exhales slightly.

'I'm sorry,' I whisper.

He opens his eyes and looks at me puzzled.

'Why?'

'What I said.'

'You didn't tell me anything that I didn't know.' And her eyes soften with relief. 'I'm sorry I hurt you.'

I shrug my shoulders.

'I asked for it.' And now I know. I swallow. Here is. I need to say my piece. 'I don't think I can be whatever you want me to be,' I whisper. His eyes widen slightly and he blinks, his frightened expression returning.

'You are everything I want you to be.'

What?

'I don't understand. I'm not obedient, and you can be sure that I won't let you do this to me again. And that's what you need, you said it.'

He closes his eyes again and I can see a myriad of emotions run through his face. When he opens them again, his expression is dark. Oh no.

'You're right. I should let you go. I'm no good for you.'

My scalp stings as every hair follicle in my body grab attention, and the world moves away from me, leaving a wide yawning abyss into which I fall. Oh no.

'I don't want to go,' I whisper. Damn - that's it. Pay or play. Tears are swimming in my eyes once more.

'I don't want you to go either,' he whispers harshly. He reaches out and gently strokes my cheek and wipes a falling tear with his thumb. 'I have been alive since I met you.' His thumb traces the contours of my lower lip.

'Me too,' I whisper, 'I fell in love with you, Grayson.

Her eyes widen again, but this time with pure, undiluted fear.

'No,' he breathes as if I've cut off his wind.

Oh no.

'You can't love me, Naddalin. No... that's wrong.' He is horrified.

'False, why is this wrong?'

'Well, look at you. I can't make you happy.' Her voice is distressed.

'But you make me happy.' I frown.

'Not at the moment, I'm not doing what I want to do.'

Holy shit. It is. That's what it boils down to - incompatibility - and all these poor subs come to mind.

'We're never going to get past that, are we?' I whisper my scalp prickling with fear.

He shakes his head sadly. I close my eyes. I can't bear to watch it.

'Well... I'd better go, then,' I whispered, wincing as I sit down.

'No, don't go.' He looks panicked.

'There's no point in me staying. Suddenly I feel tired, really dog tired, and I

want to go now. I get out of bed and Grayson follows him.

'I'm going to get dressed. I would like some privacy,' I said, my voice flat and empty as I left him standing in the bedroom.

Going down, I threw a glance in the hall, thinking that a few hours earlier I had laid my head on his shoulder while playing the piano. So much has happened since.

I had my eyes open and saw the extent of his depravity, and now I know that he is not capable of loving - of giving or receiving love. My worst fears have come true. And strangely, it's very liberating.

The pain is such that I refuse to recognize it. I feel numb. I kind of slipped out of my body and am now a casual observer of this unfolding tragedy. I shower quickly and methodically, only thinking about every second in front of me. Now squeeze the bottle of shower gel. Put the bottle of shower gel back on the holder. Rub the rag over your face, shoulders... over and over again, all simple, mechanical actions, requiring simple mechanical thoughts.

I finish my shower - and since I haven't washed my hair, I can dry myself off quickly. I get dressed in the bathroom, taking my jeans and my t-shirt out of my small suitcase. My jeans are rubbing against my back, but frankly, whispered in that I salute as it distracts my mind from what is happening to my broken and shattered heart.

I bend down to close my suitcase, and the bag with Grayson's present catches my eye, a modeling kit for a Blahnik L23 glider, something to build for him. Tears threaten. Oh no… happier times, when there was more hope. I take it out of the holster, knowing that I have to

give him. Quickly, I tear a small piece of paper from my notebook, hastily scribble a note for it, and leave it on top of the box.

I look at myself in the mirror. A pale, haunted ghost is watching me. I pick up my hair in a ponytail and ignore how swollen my eyelids are from crying. My subconscious nods in approval. Even she knows not to be sneaky right now. I can't believe my world is crumbling around me in a barren heap of ashes, all my hopes and dreams are sorely shattered. No, no, don't

think about it. Not now, not yet. Taking a deep breath, I grab my suitcase, and after putting the glider kit and my note on her pillow, I head to the great room.

Grayson is on the phone. He is dressed in black jeans and a t-shirt. His feet are bare.

'What did he say!' he cries, making me jump. 'Well, he could have told us the fucking truth. What's his number, I have to call him... Welch, that is real shit.' He looks up and doesn't leave his dark, brooding eyes. 'Find her,' he snaps and flips the switch.

I walk over to the couch and retrieve my backpack, doing my best to ignore it. I pull out the Mac and head back to the kitchen, placing it neatly on the breakfast bar, along with the BlackBerry and the car key. When I turn to face him, he looks at me in horror.

'I need the money Stephen got for my Beetle.' My voice is clear and calm, without emotion... extraordinary.

'Naddalin, I don't want these things, they're yours,' he said incredulously. 'Please take them.'

'No Grayson - I only accepted them in pain - and I don't want them arnymore.'

'Naddalin, be reasonable,' he scolds me, even now.

'I don't want anything that reminds me of you. I just need the money Stephen got for my car.' My voice is quite monotonous.

He gasps.

'Are you really trying to hurt me?'

'No.' I frown at him. Of course not... I love you. 'I'm not. I'm trying to protect myself,' I whisper. Because you don't want me as I want you.

'Please, Naddalin, take this stuff.

'Grayson, I don't want to fight - I just need the money.'

He narrows his eyes, but I'm no longer intimidated by him. Well, only a little. I look back impassively, without blinking or stepping back.

'Would you like to take a check?' he said sourly.

'Yes. I think you're good at it.'

He isn't smiling, he just turns on his heel and walks into his office. I take one last lingering look around her apartment - at the art on the walls - all abstract, serene, cool... cold, even. Fit, I thought distractedly. My eyes turn to the piano. Jeez - if I had kept my mouth shut we would have had sex on the piano. No, fucked, we would have fucked on the piano.

Well, I would have made love. The thought is heavy and sad in my mind. He never made love to me, has he always fucked with him.

Grayson comes back and hands me an envelope.

'Stephen has a good price. It's a classic car. You can ask him. He'll take you home.'

He nods in the direction over my shoulder. I turn around and Stephen stands in the doorway, dressed in his suit, as crisp as ever.

'It's good, I can take myself home, thank you.'

I turn to stare at Grayson, and I see the barely contained fury in his eyes.

'Are you going to challenge me at every turn?'

'Why change a habit of a lifetime?' I give him a little apologetic shrug.

He closes his eyes in frustration and runs his hand through his hair.

'Please, Naddalin, let Stephen take you home.'

'I'll get the car, Miss Black,' Stephen announces with authority. Grayson nods at him, and when I look around Stephen is gone.

I turn to face Grayson. We are four feet from each other. He takes a step forward, and instinctively I step back. He stops, and the anguish in his expression is palpable, his gray eyes burning.

'I don't want you to go,' he whispered, his voice full of lust.

'I can't stay. I know what I want and you can't give it to me, and I can't give you what you need.'

He takes another step forward and I put my hands up.

'Don't do that, please.' I step back in front of him. There is no way I can tolerate his touch now, he will kill me. 'I can not do that.'

Grabbing my suitcase and backpack, I make my way to the foyer. He follows me, keeping a careful distance. He presses the elevator button and the doors open. I ride.

'Bye, Grayson, 'I whisper.

'Naddalin, bye,' he said softly, and he looks completely, completely broken, a man in excruciating pain, reflecting what I feel inside. I look away from him before changing my mind and trying to comfort him.

The elevator doors close and it pulls me into the bowels of the basement and my hell.

Stephen holds the door open for me and I get into the back of the car. I avoid eye contact.

Embarrassment and shame come over me. I am a complete failure. I had hoped to drag my numerous Shadows into the light, but it turned out to be a task beyond my meager abilities. Desperately, I

try to keep my emotions in the bank and at bay. As we make our way to 4th Avenue, I stare out the window, and the enormity of what I have done slowly overwhelms me. Damn - I left it. The only man I have ever loved. The only man I slept with.

I gasp and the dikes burst. Tears flow spontaneously and unwelcome down my cheeks, and I hastily wipe them off with my fingers, reaching for my sunglasses in my bag. As we stop at some traffic lights, Stephen hands me a linen handkerchief. He doesn't say anything or looks in my direction, and I take him with gratitude.

'Thank you,' I mumble, and this quiet little gesture of kindness is my downfall. I sit in the luxurious leather seats and cry.

The apartment is empty and unfamiliar. I haven't lived here long enough to make me feel at home. I walk straight to my room, and there, hanging limply on the end of my bed, is a very sad and deflated helicopter balloon. Fake and Gay, who looks and feels exactly like me. I angrily grab her on my railing, slam the tie and hug her. Oh - what did I do?

I fall on my bed, my shoes and everything, and I scream. The pain is indescribable... physical, mental... metaphysical... it's everywhere, seeping into the bone marrow. Pain.

It's heartbreak - and I brought it on myself. Deep down, a mean and spontaneous thought comes from my inner goddess, her lip curled in a growl... the physical pain of the bite of a belt is nothing, nothing compared to this devastation. I roll up, hopelessly grasping Stephen's flat film balloon and tissue, and yield to my misery.